

Goal conflict, goal striving, and psychological well-being

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Abstract Although goal conflict is an important part of classic and contemporary theories of motivation, the correlates of goal conflict are not well understood. We identify and distinguish conflicting and facilitating goals, and assess relations with goal attainment and psychological well-being in a short-term, prospective study design. Results from multilevel models demonstrated that individuals with greater conflict were less successful in attaining their goals, but the goals they failed attain were not necessarily the ones in conflict. People who experienced goal conflict tended to be ruminative and hesitant, and reported greater levels of negative affect and increases in depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization. People who experienced goal facilitation reported greater levels of positive affect, life satisfaction, and successful goal attainment. This study identifies several implications of holding conflicting and facilitating goals, but also points to a theoretical inconsistency pertaining to goal conflict. Namely, conflicting goals may not be inherently less attainable than nonconflicting goals. We argue that distinguishing between goal- and person-level factors is essential for understanding goal striving.

Keywords Goals · Goal conflict · Goal facilitation · Goal attainment · Well-being · Multilevel modeling

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Introduction

Personal goals can give meaning and structure to people's lives. Research evidence links meaningful goal pursuit to healthy psychological functioning and positive life outcomes, including subjective well-being (Diener et al. 1999; Koestner et al. 2002) and successful academic and work performance (Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Locke and Latham 2002). However, goals can also hinder efforts at goal attainment and undermine well-being. When a person holds several desirable goals, potential for conflict arises because those goals cannot all be pursued at the same time. As a result, certain goals are sometimes acted upon at the expense of others.

Goal conflict occurs when the pursuit of one goal undermines the pursuit of another valued goal. Conflict may result any time a person works toward multiple goals at once. Young adults in college, for example, typically strive to do well in their classes, socialize with others to meet new people, and often work full- or part-time jobs to earn money. Because of limited resources (e.g., time, energy, money), pursuing one set of goals hinders efforts at pursuing other goals. Goal conflict may also result when plans and behaviors are incompatible for two or more goals (Riediger and Freund 2004; Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006). For example, trying to become more self-confident or self-sufficient while also seeking approval or assistance from others is inherently conflicting. The behaviors aimed at the one goal are incompatible with the other.

Although conflict is an important part of classic (Lewin 1935; Miller 1944) and contemporary (Gray and McNaughton 2000) theories of motivation and personality functioning, the empirical foundation documenting the effects of goal conflict is surprisingly thin. One reason for the relative lack of research may be that most goal theories

(e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000; Ford and Ford 1987; Locke and Latham 2002) focus on characteristics of single goals and related outcomes rather than the dynamic interrelations among multiple goals. As described below, this research reveals mixed findings across studies and a failure to sustain an important distinction between goal-level and person-level phenomena.

In this study, we examined goal conflict in a young adult sample using a short-term, prospective study design. We sought to identify the kinds of goals young adults report as conflicting and assess patterns of relations between goal conflict and two outcomes measured over 4–6 weeks: goal attainment and psychological well-being. We briefly review studies that have examined these relations and highlight areas of the literature that have produced inconsistent or ambiguous results. We consider the following questions: To what extent does goal conflict inhibit goal attainment? Are conflicting goals, on average, less likely to be achieved over time or are persons with goal conflict less successful in goal attainment? Is the tendency to view one's goals as being in conflict a trait-like feature of individuals? To what extent is goal conflict associated with psychological distress, and how does conflict differ empirically from goal facilitation?

Goal conflict and inhibited goal striving

A question of substantive interest in the goal conflict literature is the degree to which conflict is associated with behavioral inhibition. Emmons and King (1988) found that individuals with more conflict between their goals tended to spend more time thinking about, yet spent less time acting on, their conflicted strivings. Similarly, Cantor et al. (1992) reported a sizeable correlation ($r = .51$) between life-task conflict and time spent thinking about the tasks. Kehr (2003) reported a medium negative correlation ($r = -.30$) between goal conflict and attainment of newly set goals 5 months later in the context of a self-management training program. Kehr concluded that “goal conflicts that persevere over time were associated with inhibited attainment of new goals” (p. 195).

Whether individuals with more conflict experience greater motivational inhibition, or whether goal conflict does indeed inhibit attainment of the goals in question, is unclear because many studies are cross-sectional and infer goal-level phenomenon from person-level data (i.e., ratings averaged across goals). Problems arise when drawing conclusions about goal-level phenomena from data analyzed at the person level (Austin and Vancouver 1996). Consider the claim that goal conflict diminishes the likelihood of successful goal attainment. This could mean that for many (or even most) people conflicting goals are less likely to be attained than non-conflicting goals.

Alternatively, the claim might mean that those persons with higher levels of goal conflict are, on average, less successful in attaining their goals. Note that the former interpretation (at the goal-level) is independent of the second interpretation (at the person-level). Neither, either or both claims could be true.

The notion that goal conflict is an impediment to goal striving is in line with common sense. However, in some respects, goal conflict is a part of everyday life, and yet most of us are still able to make progress toward achieving our goals. Perhaps the inhibitory effects associated with goal conflict arise not from the demands of the goals themselves, but from the lack of resources of the person holding those goals (Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006). Some evidence does support the notion that the presumed causal link may be reversed. For example, King et al. (1998) found a moderate correlation between goal conflict and life goal attainment at the person-level ($r = -.27$), but a near-zero correlation at the goal-level ($r = -.05$). Similarly, Segerstrom and Solberg Nes (2006) reported a nonsignificant association between goal progress and conflict, but goal progress was evident among individuals who pursued highly valued, but conflicting, goals.

The tendency to experience conflict may therefore be associated with trait-like, motivational aspects of persons. One such aspect may involve the ability to plan and maintain self-initiated intentions. Kuhl (e.g., 1994a) developed the theory of action versus state orientation to explain the self-regulatory and information-processing mechanisms involved in volitional processes, such as turning one's goals into actions. Individuals with a strong action orientation are able to devote their cognitive resources to their current task and protect their goals from competing demands, and are thus more adept at realizing their desired future states. Individuals with more of a state orientation tend to ruminate on alternative goals or unpleasant affective states, making them less effective at goal striving. Under stressful conditions, state-oriented persons have difficulty deciding and acting on various means for achieving valued outcomes. As a result, they may be more likely to view their goals as conflicting, and less likely to attain those goals as compared to action-oriented persons.

We hypothesize that the relationship between conflict and goal attainment varies across individuals, such that conflict is problematic for some people, but not for everyone. We predicted that individuals higher in state orientation would report more conflict between their goals, and would have less success attaining goals higher in conflict. Because of the importance of academic pursuits for students, we expected that the majority of goal conflicts would involve academic goals. We predicted that more conflicting goals, in general, would be experienced as more

stressful, more difficult, and less attainable than less conflicting goals, and that individuals with higher ratings of conflict would be less successful in goal attainment, as assessed 4–6 weeks later.

Goal conflict, goal facilitation, and psychological well-being

To the extent that goal conflict inhibits goal-directed behavior, one might expect that individuals with more conflict are less likely to progress successfully toward attaining their goals, and thus goal conflict may be associated with poorer well-being. Several researchers have examined links between goals and psychological well-being (e.g., McGregor and Little 1998; Sheldon and Houser-Marko 2001) and have established a clear association between successful goal pursuit and psychological health. Other researchers have examined the implications of conflict, and have provided some empirical support for the notion that goal conflict is associated with greater psychological distress, but the results across studies have not been consistent.

Emmons and King (1988), for example, reported associations between conflict and high levels of negative affect and psychosomatic complaints. Sheldon and Kasser (1995) measured conflict using a similar assessment procedure, but did not find any associations with negative states. Other similar studies reported nonsignificant results (e.g., Kehr 2003; Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006). One recent paper even reported a significant negative correlation with depression (Kelly et al. 2011), indicating that people with more conflict are in fact better off emotionally than people with less conflict. One might reasonably conclude from these findings that there is no reliable relation between goal conflict and psychological distress.

Each of the above studies assumed that the degree to which goals conflict with or help support (i.e., facilitate) one another are opposite poles of a single dimension, and this theoretical assumption is reflected in these researchers' measurement scales. However, goals may be both conflicting and facilitating at the same time. For example, the goal "be more assertive at work" may conflict with the goal "get along with my coworkers," but facilitate the goal "attain a promotion." Similarly, academic goals may conflict with social and relaxation goals, but facilitate occupational goals. As a result of not separating the assessment of goal conflict and facilitation, the empirical correlates of these constructs are sometimes ambiguous. Riediger (2007) reviewed evidence from several research studies to argue that conflict and facilitation are not bipolar opposites and are better measured using separate unipolar scales. Riediger and Freund (2004) showed that conflict and facilitation are empirically independent of each other and demonstrated differential associations with subjective well-being and persistent goal pursuit.

There is reason to expect that conflict and facilitation are related to psychological well-being in distinct ways. Given that people typically work toward several goals simultaneously, people need to prioritize their goals and shift flexibly among them in order not to sacrifice some goals for the sake of others. When conflict occurs, negative affect should arise to signal that goal progress in one or more goal domains has been stunted, and a reorganization of plans and behaviors would be called for in order to resolve the conflict. To the extent that the conflict is not resolved, psychological well-being should decline. On the other hand, when goals facilitate each other and goal progress is satisfactory, a sense of positive well-being should emerge. When this occurs, the person should be able to shift attention and effort toward other goals (Carver and Scheier 1990). Conflict and facilitation should therefore be differentially associated with negative and positive affect, each serving a distinct function in self-regulated behavior.

As mentioned above, inconsistent findings exist in the literature with regard to goal conflict, possibly because of measurement problems. Findings with regard to goal facilitation measured using unipolar scales have been more consistent. For example, Michalak and Schulte (2002) found positive associations between intergoal "coherence" and various goal pursuit behaviors in psychotherapy, such as cooperation, self-disclosure, and willingness to test new patterns of behavior. Riediger et al. (2005) reported that goal facilitation partially mediated older adults' higher intensity of goal pursuit (see also Riediger and Freund 2004). Sheldon and Kasser (1995) found that the extent to which strivings help bring about possible futures, what they called "vertical coherence," was significantly associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including vitality, positive affect, and cognitive empathy. Thus, goal facilitation appears to be related to positive functioning. We sought to add to these findings by identifying the kinds of everyday goals young adults report as facilitating. We also wanted to further test Riediger and Freund's (2004; see also Riediger 2007) argument that goal conflict and facilitation are best measured using unipolar scales by evaluating discriminant validity correlations with psychological distress and subjective well-being.

The present research

We examined the relations of goal conflict and facilitation with goal attainment and psychological well-being in a short-term, prospective study design. We used multilevel models to examine the association between conflict and goal attainment at the goal- and person-level. At the goal-level, we predicted that conflicting goals would be less attainable, but that there would be significant variation around the within-person conflict-attainment slopes. At the

person-level, we predicted that people with higher ratings of conflict would be less successful in attaining their goals. We predicted that individuals higher in state orientation would report more conflict, and would not only have less success in goal attainment but would also have less success attaining conflicting goals. We tested parallel models with goal facilitation, and hypothesized that facilitation, at the goal- and person-level, would be predictive of higher attainment.

We also hypothesized that individuals with more conflict between their goals would report higher levels of negative affect, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization, but not lower levels of positive affect, and that individuals with more facilitation between their goals would report higher levels of positive affect and life satisfaction, but not lower levels of negative affect. We predicted that goal conflict would be associated with increases in depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization over 4–6 weeks. Finally, we examined whether goal facilitation would be associated with increases in positive affect and life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 180 undergraduate students (131 women, 48 men, 1 did not indicate their gender), enrolled at a public university in Southern California. Average age was 19 years ($SD = 1.50$; range = 18–32); 48 % were Asian or Pacific Islander, 29.5 % were Latino/Latina, 7 % were White, 4 % were African American, 7 % were Middle Eastern or Indian, and 4.5 % were mixed, other, or had missing data. All participants volunteered and received course credit for their participation.

Procedures

The first assessment took place during the first 2 weeks of a 10 week quarter. Participants ($N = 180$) provided 8 of their personal goals and rated each on conflict and facilitation as well as a number of goal dimensions described below. In addition to listing and rating their goals, all participants completed measures of subjective well-being and psychological distress.

A total of 170 of these participants participated in the second wave of assessments taking place 4–6 weeks later (average was 5 weeks). Participants again rated their goals and completed assessments of subjective well-being and psychological distress. In this second assessment, participants completed a measure of action control orientation and indicated how successful they were in attaining their goals. All participants participated on their personal computers using Internet-based survey software.

Measures

Goal elicitation and appraisal ratings

In the first assessment, participants completed a goal elicitation task. They were told that the researchers were interested in people's motives, goals, intentions, wishes, and desires. They were asked to think about the goals that are currently important to them, and how they attempted to achieve these goals. Each participant was instructed to list 8 personal goals.

Following the goal elicitation task, participants rated each goal along several dimensions. These ratings were made on 4-point scales. Appraisal ratings at the first assessment (Time 1) included: *commitment* (“How determined and committed are you to working toward this goal?”), *stress* (“Is working to attain this goal stressful?”), *ambivalence* (“Do you have mixed feelings about wanting to work toward and attain this goal?”), and *guiding principles* (“How important is this goal to your broader concerns or longer-term objectives?”). Ratings at the second assessment (Time 2) included: *difficulty* (“Was this goal difficult to attain?”) and *attainment* (“How successful have you been in attaining this goal?”).

Goal conflict

Participants were asked to “judge whether working toward one goal interferes with working toward and attaining another goal” for all 28 pairwise comparisons among their 8 goals. Because we assumed that conflict ratings are symmetrical (i.e., the effect of Goal A on Goal B is the same or similar to the effect of Goal B on Goal A), participants were asked to make a judgment about the goal pair rather than about the effect that one goal has on another. Emmons et al. (1993) noted that while asymmetrical effects may be theoretically possible, data indicate that they are nearly symmetrical, with correlations “typically close to .8” (p. 531). Reasons for goal conflict, such as resource limitations and incompatible goal attainment strategies, were provided to clarify the task. The ratings were made on a scale ranging from (1) *not at all conflicting* to (5) *very conflicting*.

In order to make the comparison process as systematic and straightforward as possible, we used survey software to pair participants' goals. The order in which the goals were presented varied such that each goal's position alternated within each goal pair. A total score for every goal was obtained by summing its ratings over the other 7 goals. A global score for total conflict was calculated by taking the mean of all ratings. Conflict ratings were obtained at Time 1 and 2 assessments. Scores at Time 1 and 2 were correlated within- and between-persons, and were stable at both the goal- (average within-person $r = .75$) and person- ($r = .62$) levels.

Goal facilitation

Participants were also asked to “judge whether working toward one goal helps support your efforts at working toward and attaining another goal.” Participants made 28 pairwise comparisons for their set of 8 goals. Facilitation ratings were also believed to be symmetrical. Therefore, participants rated the overall effect a pair of goals has on each other rather than the effect that one goal has on another. Reasons for facilitation, such as instrumental relations and overlapping strategies (Riediger and Freund 2004; Wilensky 1983), were described to clarify the task. The ratings were made on a scale ranging from (1) *not at all helpful* to (5) *very helpful*.

Goals were again paired using survey software and the order in which the goals were presented varied. A total score for each goal was obtained by summing its ratings over the other 7 goals. A global score for total facilitation was calculated by taking the mean of all ratings. Facilitation ratings were obtained at Time 1 and 2 assessments. Scores were consistent at both the goal- (average within-person $r = .75$) and person- ($r = .78$) levels.

Psychological well-being and action control orientation

Participants completed a number of instruments, including the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985), a measure of the global life satisfaction component of subjective well-being; the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988), a measure of the positive and negative affective components of subjective well-being; the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis 2000), a self-report screening measure of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization; and the Action Control Scale (ACS-90; Kuhl 1994b), an inventory designed to measure individual differences in action versus state orientation. We administered the preoccupation and hesitation subscales of the ACS-90, measuring the cognitive and behavioral aspects of state orientation, respectively. All measures had acceptable internal consistency reliability.

Results

Descriptive qualities of goals

Participants listed, on average, 7.53 goals ($SD = 1.47$). They rated their goals as low in conflict ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .66$, possible range 1–5) and as slightly to somewhat helpful in supporting their efforts at working toward and attaining other goals ($M = 2.51$, $SD = .83$, possible range 1–5). We calculated correlations between goal ratings within each person to examine the relations among goal

dimensions. Within-person goal conflict was positively and significantly¹ associated with stress (average within-person $r = .40$, $p < .01$) and difficulty (average within-person $r = .32$, $p < .01$). Within-person goal facilitation was associated with stress (average within-person $r = .32$, $p < .01$), commitment (average within-person $r = .40$, $p < .01$), and guiding principles (average within-person $r = .42$, $p < .01$). Although facilitating goals were experienced as stressful, they were also quite important to people’s higher-order values. Conflict and facilitation were uncorrelated (average within-person $r = .07$, $p > .05$), providing further evidence that these are independent constructs.

We classified each goal using a taxonomy with eight broad domains (e.g., academic, social) developed for classifying goals of college students (Kaiser and Ozer 1997).² The content domains were dummy coded and correlated with conflict and facilitation within persons. Academic goals were significantly and positively related to goal conflict (average within-person $r = .30$, $p < .01$) as well as goal facilitation (average within-person $r = .35$, $p < .01$). Moral/religious goals were negatively associated with goal conflict (average within-person $r = -.30$, $p < .05$), indicating that goals that are moral/religious were rated as less in conflict with other goals. Social and financial goals were negatively associated with goal facilitation (average within-person $r_s = -.18, -.25$, $p_s < .05$), indicating that these goals were less supportive of other goals. Table 1 presents concrete examples of conflicting and facilitation goal pairs.

When aggregated to the person-level (i.e., ratings averaged across goals for each person), conflict associated positively with ambivalence ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), stress ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), and difficulty ($r = .26$, $p < .01$), indicating that people with a higher degree of conflict reported mixed feelings about their goals and felt that their goals were stressful and difficult to attain. Goal facilitation associated positively with commitment ($r = .22$, $p < .01$)

¹ These and other significance tests of within-person correlations are based on treating the $N = 180$ r -to- z transformed correlations as scores and testing the null hypothesis that the values were sampled from a distribution with a mean of 0.00. Reported mean values in the text have been transformed back to r .

² A panel of three undergraduate research assistants classified each goal into a hierarchical goal taxonomy structured around eight broad content domains, including academic/occupational, social relationships, financial concerns, health and fitness, organization, affect control, independence, and moral/religious. Also included is an “other” category for meta-goals and acculturation/language goals. A participant’s goal was content-coded when two of the three raters agreed on its assignment. Raters agreed on 1,187 of 1,356 goals (87.5 % agreement). For the remaining 169 goals, two independent raters classified each goal, and they agreed on 140 of them bringing the consensus rate to 97.9 %. The remaining 29 goals were classified via a roundtable discussion by the authors and research assistants.

Table 1 Examples of conflicting and facilitating goal pairs

Conflicting goal pairs	Facilitating goal pairs
Become a pediatric neurosurgeon, have more social free time	Earn a Master's degree in business, build financial security
Maintain or increase my current GPA, spend more time with my boyfriend	Get good grades, manage my time better
Get straight A's by the end of the quarter, get a job	Develop a new technology, be known by the world
Attain a better GPA, Stay in shape and be healthy	Work on my relationship with my mom, spend less time browsing the internet
Have a minor, lower my stress level with school work	Spend more time with my family and friends, lower my stress level
Get into medical school, keep working on my illustration skills and become a great artist	Make new friends, be more optimistic
Keep in touch with my roots, join more clubs and activities with my hall mates	Become patient, be a better Muslim
Spend more time with my mom and brother, get my Level 6 at work (a raise)	Volunteer for community service, become a better person
Volunteer in more clubs and extracurricular activities, become fully fluent in five languages	Get in shape for the summer, eat healthier
Earn a lot of money, get closer to God	Adopt a healthier lifestyle, become a more positive person

and guiding principles ($r = .39, p < .01$), but not with ambivalence, stress, or difficulty. Although facilitating goals were stressful, people with a higher degree of facilitation did not report higher than average levels of stress. Conflict and facilitation were positively associated between persons ($r = .16, p < .05$).

Finally, goal conflict and the preoccupation and hesitation facets of state orientation were significantly and positively associated ($r_s = .27, .31, p_s < .01$, respectively), thus supporting the hypothesis that state-oriented individuals are more likely to experience conflict between their goals. Goal facilitation was not significantly related to the preoccupation and hesitation facets of state orientation ($r_s = -.11, -.14, p_s = .17, .09$, respectively).

Goal conflict and attainment

We used multilevel models and HLM 6 software (Raudenbush et al. 2004) to estimate the within- and between-person variance components in intercepts and slopes for goal attainment using goal- and person-level predictors. In the within-person component of the model, goal attainment was modeled as a function of the individual's mean attainment across goals, the expected change in attainment per unit increase in goal conflict, and an error term. Goal conflict at level-1 was person centered:

$$1. \text{ Level 1 Model: Goal Attainment}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Goal Conflict}) + r_{ij}$$

In the between-person component of the model, the level-1 intercepts and slopes were modeled using centered person-level predictors, including mean conflict and state orientation,³ and random error:

$$2. \text{ Level 2 Model: } \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Mean Conflict}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{State Orientation}) + u_{0j}$$

$$3. \text{ Level 2 Model: } \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{Mean Conflict}) + \gamma_{12}(\text{State Orientation}) + u_{1j}$$

The entire mixed model was therefore specified as:

$$4. \text{ Goal Attainment}_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Mean Conflict}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{State Orientation}) + \gamma_{10}(\text{Goal Conflict}) + \gamma_{11}(\text{Mean Conflict} * \text{Goal Conflict}) + \gamma_{12}(\text{State Orientation} * \text{Goal Conflict}) + u_{0j} + u_{1j}(\text{Goal Conflict}) + r_{ij}$$

In addition to the variance components, we report fixed effect coefficients with their associated t tests. The γ coefficients are analogous to raw coefficients in regression models, and are thus scale dependent. The t value and associated df were used to obtain an effect size r .

We first estimated an unconditional model with no predictor variables to determine the proportion of variance in goal attainment that is between individuals and found that the between-person portion of the goal attainment variance was nearly 20 % (intraclass correlation = .195).

We then estimated a model with goal- and person-level conflict. As shown under Model 1 in Table 2, goal-level conflict was a nonsignificant predictor of goal attainment. The variance around the slopes, however, was significant ($\tau_{11} = .1368, p < .01$), indicating that the effect of goal

³ We computed a state orientation composite by averaging over the preoccupation and hesitation scale items to include in the multilevel modeling analyses. Separate analyses were run for the preoccupation and hesitation facets. The results were consistent with those for the state orientation composite, although they were somewhat smaller in magnitude. We present the results for the composite variable for sake of parsimony.

Table 2 Coefficients (and standard errors) of multilevel regression models predicting goal attainment

Model parameter	Unconditional model	Conflict-attainment		Facilitation-attainment	
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Fixed effects					
Intercept (γ_{00})	2.33 (.04)**	2.33 (.04)**	2.33 (.04)**	2.33 (.04)**	2.33 (.04)**
Level-1 intercepts					
Mean conflict (γ_{01})	–	–.14 (.06)*	–.07 (.06)	–	–
Mean facilitation (γ_{01})	–	–	–	.15 (.05)*	.13 (.05)*
State orientation (γ_{02})	–	–	–.02 (.01)**	–	–.02 (.01)**
Conflict (γ_{10})	–	–.07 (.07)	–.06 (.06)	–	–
Facilitation (γ_{10})	–	–	–	.09 (.05) [†]	.09 (.05) [†]
Level-1 slopes					
Mean conflict (γ_{11})	–	.04 (.12)	.02 (.12)	–	–
Mean facilitation (γ_{11})	–	–	–	.04 (.08)	.04 (.08)
State orientation (γ_{12})	–	–	.01 (.01)	–	.00 (.01)
Variance components					
Goal level					
Var(r_{ij}) = σ^2	.7190	.6850	.6854	.6987	.6990
Person level					
Var(u_{0j}) = τ_{00}	.1745**	.1722**	.1603**	.1627**	.1488**
Var(u_{1j}) = τ_{11}	–	.1368**	.1364**	.0599	.0611
Modeled variance^a					
Proportion of variance in r_{ij} explained	–	.0473	.0467	.0282	.0278
Proportion of variance in u_{0j} explained	–	.0132	.0814	.0676	.1473

$N = 1,227$ goals nested within 155 persons

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .10$; two-tailed

^a Proportional reductions in the variance components for the intercept in comparison to the unconditional model (i.e., model without predictor variables)

conflict on attainment was highly variable: the conflict-attainment slope was in the negative direction for some, the positive direction for others, but not significantly different from zero on average. When averaged over goals, mean conflict emerged as a significant predictor ($\gamma_{01} = -.14$, $p < .05$, $t(153) = -2.46$, $r = -.19$), indicating that individuals with higher levels of conflict reported less success in goal attainment. In Model 2, state orientation was significantly and negatively related to goal attainment ($\gamma_{02} = -.02$, $p < .01$, $t(152) = -2.89$, $r = -.23$). However, contrary to expectations, state orientation was a nonsignificant predictor of the level-1 conflict-attainment slopes ($\gamma_{12} = .01$, $p > .05$, $t(152) = .587$, $r = .05$). In a further elaborated model, the mean conflict-state orientation interaction showed no significant effect.

A second and parallel multilevel model was estimated using goal attainment as the outcome, but with goal facilitation as a goal-level predictor, and mean facilitation and state orientation as the person-level predictors. As shown under Model 3 in Table 2, goal-level facilitation was a marginally significant predictor of goal attainment ($\gamma_{10} = .09$, $p = .09$, $t(153) = 1.71$, $r = .14$). The variance

around the slopes was nonsignificant ($\tau_{11} = .0599$, $p > .05$). When averaged over goals, mean facilitation was significantly and positively associated with goal attainment at the person-level ($\gamma_{01} = .15$, $p < .05$, $t(153) = 3.14$, $r = .25$). Thus, individuals with more facilitating goals, on average, were more successful in attaining their goals. In Model 4, state orientation was again a significant and negative predictor of goal attainment ($\gamma_{02} = -.02$, $p < .01$, $t(152) = -3.16$, $r = -.25$). The interaction of mean facilitation with state orientation showed no significant effect when tested in a further elaborated model.

Goal conflict, goal facilitation, and psychological well-being

Table 3 presents correlations of goal conflict and facilitation with subjective well-being and psychological distress variables assessed at Time 1. As shown, mean conflict was positively associated with negative affect, but not with life satisfaction or positive affect. In comparison, mean facilitation was positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect, but not with negative affect. Thus, conflict

Table 3 Correlations of goal conflict and goal facilitation with subjective well-being and psychological distress at Time 1

Criterion	Goal conflict	Goal facilitation
<i>Subjective well-being</i>		
Life satisfaction	-.09	.24**
Positive affect	.01	.33**
Negative affect	.27**	-.04
<i>Psychological distress</i>		
Depression	.15 [†]	-.02
Anxiety	.24**	.12
Psychosomatization	.16*	.10

$N = 167$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [†] $p = .061$; two-tailed

and facilitation were distinctly related to subjective well-being, as hypothesized. Conflict was also associated with anxiety and somatization. Conflict and facilitation showed a similar pattern of correlations with subjective well-being when measured at Time 2, such that conflict was again associated with negative affect ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) but not with positive affect, whereas facilitation was again associated with positive affect ($r = .23$, $p < .01$) but not with negative affect.

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses using depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization at Time 2 as the outcomes. Scores on each distress variable at Time 1 were entered on the first step of each regression equation. Then goal conflict at Time 1 was entered. As can be seen in Table 4, baseline levels of psychological distress were highly correlated with distress at Time 2, demonstrating stability of distress symptoms. Goal conflict was a significant predictor of future levels of psychological distress when the terms for initial depression, anxiety, and somatization were included in the model. Specifically, Time 1 conflict predicted increases in depression ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$), anxiety ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$), and somatization ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$) over 4–6 weeks. Parallel analyses were conducted with positive affect and life satisfaction at Time 2 as the outcomes, and goal facilitation as the predictor.

With terms for initial well-being in the model, goal facilitation was a nonsignificant predictor of prospective well-being.

Discussion

This study examined goal conflict in relation to goal striving and psychological well-being measured over 4–6 weeks. Results from multilevel models demonstrated that conflict was unrelated to attainment at the goal-level, suggesting that on average conflicting goals were not associated with lower ratings of success. However, the conflict-attainment relation varied significantly between persons, and when averaged across goals, conflict associated significantly and negatively with attainment. Thus, individuals with more conflict tended to be less successful in attaining their goals, but the goals they failed to attain were not necessarily the ones in conflict.

The lack of relation between conflict and attainment at the goal-level is inconsistent with earlier conceptualizations of goal conflict. Classic motivational theories (Lewin 1935; Miller 1944) define conflict as a situation in which progress toward one goal simultaneously reduces the likelihood of successful attainment of a second goal. While individuals with conflict were indeed less successful in attaining their goals, conflicting goals were not necessarily those with lower levels of attainment. Conflicting goals did not appear to be inherently less attainable than nonconflicting goals. Rather, the effect was variable between individuals.

Our data suggest that many people are in fact quite competent at pursuing and achieving their goals, despite problems and conflict, while others seem to struggle. We attempted to model these individual differences using the action-state dimension conceptualized in action control theory (Kuhl 1994a). As described by Kuhl, state-oriented individuals tend to be ruminative and preoccupied with possible choices, alternate goals, and ways through which their desired goals can be achieved. These individuals may

Table 4 Multiple regression models predicting changes in psychological distress from goal conflict

	Model	R^2	Distress variable Time 1		Goal conflict Time 1	
			Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Depression Time 2	1	.4303	.66**	.06	–	–
	2	.4534	.63**	.06	.15*	.06
Anxiety Time 2	1	.4623	.68**	.06	–	–
	2	.4773	.65**	.06	.13*	.07
Somatization Time 2	1	.3552	.60**	.07	–	–
	2	.3761	.57**	.07	.15**	.07

$N = 157$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$; two-tailed

not be deeply emotionally conflicted, but they do appear to be conflicted in how they negotiate goal pursuits in their daily lives. People higher in state orientation did indeed report more conflict between their goals. Contrary to expectations, however, they were not any less successful in attaining conflicting goals than were more action-oriented persons. The short-term effects of rumination and hesitation may disappear over time as a result of state-oriented persons' continued persistence toward difficult goals.

The pursuit of multiple goals is a salient feature of everyday life. Sometimes, this process requires little effort or control. Other times, competing goals necessitate a reevaluation of plans, strategies, and goal commitments. The fact that people manage to get things done despite conflict and problems implies the existence of psychological mechanisms for coping with conflict. Emmons et al. (1993) discussed some common strategies, such as prioritization, integration, and appeal to higher values. Kopetz et al. (2011) suggested that people seek integrative alternatives to help advance several active goals at once. Thus, rather than abandon one goal for another, many people may in fact learn to deal with conflict by identifying various means that satisfy multiple goals.

Conflict resolution is also important for psychological well-being. Theorists have long noted that negative experiences are associated with intraindividual conflict and that healthy psychological functioning emerges when aspects of the self are integrated into a relatively harmonious whole (for reviews, see Epstein 1982; McReynolds 1990). In terms of personal goals, conflict should impair, and facilitation should enhance, psychological well-being. In the present study, individuals with higher ratings of conflict reported greater levels of negative affect and psychological distress, whereas people with higher ratings of facilitation reported greater positive affect and life satisfaction. When conflict persisted over 4–6 weeks, conflicted persons reported significant increases in depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms. On the other hand, goal facilitation was not associated with sustained gains in well-being, suggesting that the benefits of facilitating goals are perhaps more immediate than long-term. As others have suggested (e.g., Carver and Scheier 1990), negative affective states may direct attention to potential problems, whereas positive affect might indicate that goal progress is moving along favorably and allow the individual to focus on other goals.

Future research should try to distinguish between sources of goal conflict. Previous studies (e.g., Riediger and Freund 2004; Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006) have identified conflict due to limited resources, such as time, energy, and money, and conflict due to incompatible plans and behaviors. The content of conflicting goals (see Table 1) suggests that a great majority of conflicts reported

in this sample were due to limited resources. These conflicts centered mostly on academic and social goals, such as relaxing and spending time with friends and family while also working and doing well in school. These goals may require effective prioritization of resources so that one goal is not sacrificed for the sake of another. In older adults, this may be experienced as a work-family conflict and have potentially negative psychological effects (e.g., Grzywacz and Marks 2000).⁴

Inherent goal conflict seems much less common among college students. This type of conflict involves plans and behaviors that are logically incompatible. Trying to save money by gambling, wanting to spend more time outdoors while building a business, and seeking approval from others while trying not to care about what other people think are examples of this type of conflict. Inherent conflict may have quite different implications for goal attainment, psychological well-being, and how the conflict is managed. However, a reliable and valid assessment procedure for differentiating inherent conflict from resource conflict has not yet been established. Some researchers have used trained research assistants to provide objective ratings (Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006), but it is not clear whether this approach is more advantageous than self ratings. Moreover, base rates for inherent conflict tend to be very low (e.g., Riediger and Freund 2004; Segerstrom and Solberg Nes 2006). People may not be fully aware of inherent conflict, and thus not spontaneously report it as a result. Future research should develop novel elicitation procedures to explicitly address this type of conflict.

Two methodological issues should be attended to in future research. First, conflict and facilitation should be measured using unipolar scales of measurement, as Riediger and Freund (2004) have argued. The results reported in the present study support the notion that conflict is associated with psychological distress. As noted by Riediger (2007), studies using bipolar scales have produced nonsignificant or mixed results, whereas studies using unipolar scales have shown that the conflict-distress relation is consistent and replicable. Second, future studies should measure the effect of each goal twice (i.e., effect of Goal A generated on other goals and effect of Goal A received by other goals), particularly for goal facilitation. While conflict generated and conflict received may be equivalent for any given goal, the same may not be true for goal facilitation. For example, a goal of eating healthy could facilitate a goal of working out because you gain

⁴ Freud's simple and insightful sentiment toward mental health was the ability "to love and to work" (Erikson 1963, pp. 264–265). It is interesting to see here that the majority of goal conflicts reported by young adults involve these two principal domains of life, and that people struggling with these tasks reported greater levels of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatization.

energy from healthy food, but the same might not be true in reverse. This points to a potential limitation of the present study as the facilitation measure of any single goal may not be a true index of the extent to which that goal facilitates other goals. This might help explain why goal facilitation was only a marginally significant predictor of goal attainment at the goal-level.

Finally, distinguishing between goal- and person-level variables is essential for understanding goal striving. Our results suggest that person-level variables may be more important in determining the effects of conflict on goal attainment than goal-level variables. We do not suggest that intergoal relations are unimportant, but that individual difference variables appear to buffer against the effects of conflict. A fruitful direction for future research is to identify what these individual differences are. The ability to plan ahead, delay gratification, and manage stress levels are obvious candidates. A less obvious but potentially interesting moderator is the ability to tolerate cognitive complexities. Sheldon (1995) found that creative people (e.g., art students, graduate students in ecology) were more tolerant of goal conflict, and advanced students in physics even reported some benefit from conflict. Although we were unable to identify moderators of the conflict-attainment relation, we believe that research distinguishing between goal- and person-level characteristics will make an important contribution to understanding why some people succeed while others struggle in the face of goal conflict.

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