

When the End Justifies the Means: Self-Defeating Behaviors as “Rational” and “Successful” Self-Regulation

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Abstract

We explore the possibility that self-defeating behaviors represent self-regulatory success rather than failure. Specifically, we suggest that drug use, overeating, risky sexual behavior, self-harm, and martyrdom represent means toward individuals' goals. In this capacity, they may be initiated and pursued upon goal activation despite potentially negative consequences, and thus exemplify the long-held notion that the end justifies the means. We propose a means-end analysis, present evidence that these activities demonstrate the hallmarks of goal pursuit, and discuss novel implications for understanding these behaviors.

Keywords

goals, means, self-regulation, rationality, overeating, risky sexual behavior, substance use, self-injury, martyrdom

People knowingly harm themselves by abusing drugs, overeating, putting themselves at risk for HIV infection, and becoming martyrs. These behaviors seem at odds with the general assumption that people act in their best interest and avoid known negative consequences. Such self-defeating actions, whose health, legal, and social costs seem to outweigh their benefits, are often considered self-regulatory “failures” (Wagner & Heatherton, 2015). However, what is missing from this conceptualization is a consideration of the function these behaviors serve. From an evolutionary perspective, behaviors that today look problematic according to societal standards might have evolved to promote reproductive fitness (e.g., Steinberg & Belsky, 1996). Although they may interfere with health and safety, these behaviors satisfy other important goals.

In line with this notion, we propose that individuals' apparent self-defeating behaviors represent strategic goal pursuit. To support this case, we present evidence suggesting that substance use, engagement in risky sexual behavior, self-harm, and self-sacrifice follow the general principles of goal pursuit and therefore match the hallmark features of successful self-regulation. This approach (a) emphasizes the commonalities among behaviors, (b) allows us to move away from stigmatizing the behavior (as being due to a lack of willpower) to understanding its functionality, and (c) suggests new strategies for preventing and changing self-defeating behavior.

Self-Defeating Behavior as Goal Pursuit

Engagement in self-defeating behavior as means to goal achievement has been discussed in the past (e.g., Baumeister, 1997). However, previous work focused mostly on specific goal contents (e.g., social acceptance). It paid less attention to the principles governing when, why, or how people engage in self-defeating behaviors despite negative consequences. We argue that understanding these principles is fundamental to delineate between these behaviors as failures versus strategic attempts toward goal attainment. In what follows, we define self-regulation and describe several of its principles. We then provide examples of how these principles may operate in self-defeating behaviors.

Self-regulation

Human behavior is driven by goals, defined as cognitive representations of desirable end states interconnected with other goals and means of attainment (Kruglanski et al., 2002). *Self-regulation* represents the processes by

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which people set goals and attempt to attain them (Carver & Scheier, 2011). Self-regulatory success, therefore, refers to acting in accordance with one's goals, whatever they may be (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2009). It involves, but is not limited to, setting a goal, finding an appropriate means of attaining it, and negotiating conflicts with other goals. This approach assumes that goal adoption, activation, and pursuit often happen in an unconscious manner (Custers & Aarts, 2010). Furthermore, it does not assume that successful self-regulation refers to following prescriptive norms and pursuing specific goals (e.g., health over immediate pleasures, long-term over short-term goals; cf. Carver, Johnson, Joormann, & Scheier, 2015). Rather, it is concerned with the principles underlying behavioral decision making.

Principles of goal pursuit

Goal activation and means selection. Although it is often taken for granted that goal pursuit originates in consciousness, it can also arise from nonconscious sources. It operates through resource mobilization and selection of actions believed to advance the goal, without the person being aware of the goal or its operation. Indeed, goal activation spreads to corresponding behavioral plans that are believed to be instrumental to goal attainment (e.g., through commonly shared beliefs) and stirs individuals to action (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & De Vries, 2001). For instance, negative affect may promote smoking as means to feel better.

Transfer of affect. Behaviors that are associated with successful goal pursuit acquire positive value through *transfer* of affect (Fishbach, Shah, & Kruglanski, 2004). Behaviors that may initially be neutral or even aversive (e.g., smoking) become desirable or capable of driving behavior in the absence of the original motivation.

Goal-conflict resolution. Multiple goal representations may become simultaneously activated and may produce competing behavioral tendencies (Kopetz, Hofmann, & Wiers, 2014; Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2013). In such situations, the person may try to find *multifinal* means that satisfy multiple goals at the same time (e.g., riding a bike for transportation and exercise; Kruglanski et al., 2013). When one goal becomes more important than its alternatives, people may engage in *goal shielding* (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002), in which they inhibit the weaker alternatives in favor of the prioritized goal. Such mechanisms facilitate mobilization and allocation of the resources necessary for goal pursuit (Kruglanski et al., 2012).

One consequence of goal shielding is *motivated distortion*, whereby the information relevant to goal pursuit

is actively distorted to fit with the current motivational state (Bélanger, Kruglanski, Chen, & Orehek, 2014). For instance, a smoker may be fully aware of the negative consequences associated with smoking but may actively choose to focus his or her attention on the relaxing aspects of the behavior.

We argue that self-defeating behaviors follow these general principles of goal pursuit:

1. They are enacted when perceived as instrumental to an individual's goals.
2. They acquire value as a function of their utility in the service of goal attainment.
3. Their pursuit requires goal-conflict resolution and may result in the inhibition of alternative considerations of health or safety.

Substance use

Substance use as means to active goals. Substance use has been approached in terms of its instrumentality for fulfilling different goals. Drugs are taken to socialize and fit in, to achieve a pleasant "high," to escape an aversive withdrawal-driven "low," or to cope with negative affect (Kopetz, Lejuez, Wiers, & Kruglanski, 2013).

Transfer of affect from goals to substance use. Although over 90% of individuals experiment with alcohol and/or illicit substances, only a small proportion of these individuals become addicts. One challenge for addiction researchers is to understand the transition from casual drug use to addiction. This transition has typically been explained in terms of neuroadaptations (e.g., Robinson & Berridge, 2004). The principle of emotional transfer may offer insights into the psychological processes accompanying these neuroadaptations. A major difference between casual and addictive drug use is the function of the behavior. Although people begin to use drugs as means to goals (e.g., social acceptance), over time, drug use becomes associated with the positive outcomes of goal attainment and may therefore become an end in itself that is compulsively pursued in the absence of the original motivation. Indeed, studies employing measures of implicit attitudes (e.g., traditional and modified versions of the Implicit Association Test) revealed that across different substance-use categories (e.g., drinking, cannabis use), substance users evaluate their drug of choice more positively than non-users. Furthermore, such evaluations predict increased levels of substance use (e.g., Houben & Wiers, 2008).

Resolution of goals in conflict with substance use. Once substance use becomes a goal in itself, it can be spontaneously activated by environmental cues. Indeed,

research has documented the capacity of contextual cues to evoke drug craving and facilitate cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that are consistent with drug-seeking and drug use (Tiffany, 1990). Substance users are cognitively distracted by drug-related stimuli. Such attentional bias guides subsequent substance use by increasing drug craving and approach behaviors toward drug-related cues (Palfai & Ostafin, 2003).

Furthermore, in line with the principle of goal shielding, the momentarily heightened accessibility of the drug-use goal facilitates the automatic inhibition of alternative concerns (Loewenstein, 2007) and distortion of the consequences associated with substance use. For instance, despite known negative consequences associated with smoking, a heightened motivation to smoke (i.e., a craving) predisposes smokers to overemphasize the positive outcomes of smoking (Kirchner & Sayette, 2007) and to underestimate personal vulnerability to smoking-related disease (Windschitl, 2002).

Risky sexual behavior

Risky sexual behavior as means to active goals.

Risky sexual behavior includes sex with multiple partners, sex with casual and commercial partners, and unprotected sex. It is the main cause associated with the spread of HIV among broad segments of society, including gay men, substance users, and heterosexual youths and women (East, Jackson, O'Brien, & Peters, 2007). Recent findings suggest that the function of the behavior for individuals' specific goals (e.g., need for communion) may be the strongest predictor of risky sexual behavior (Cooper, 2010).

Risky sexual behavior is often associated with drug use and is typically attributed to the pharmacological effects of the drugs. However, recent studies have suggested that engagement in risky sexual behavior occurs when it is perceived as instrumental to individuals' goals, including drug obtainment, intimacy, and communion. For instance, rejection sensitivity among crack-cocaine-using women is a strong predictor of risky sexual behavior. To the extent to which risky sexual behaviors are normative in the context of cocaine use, it is possible that fear and/or experience of social rejection may increase women's likelihood of engagement in such behavior to fulfill the need to belong (Kopetz, Pickover et al., 2014).

Risky sexual behavior often serves the goal of drug obtainment and may therefore become spontaneously accessible upon activation of such a goal. Indeed, in one study, increased accessibility of the drug-obtainment goal (through cocaine-related primes) resulted in faster approach tendency toward sex-exchange targets in a joystick task. Notably, this effect emerged only for participants for whom sex exchange represented an instrumental

means to drug obtainment, despite their self-reported intentions to avoid such behavior (Kopetz, Collado-Rodriguez, & Lejuez, 2015).

Overeating and obesity

Unhealthy eating also follows the principles of goal pursuit outlined above. It is pursued when it is perceived as instrumental to active goals (e.g., food enjoyment); it is facilitated through a transfer of affect from goals to unhealthy foods; and it requires the resolution of conflict with the goal of weight control.

Eating often involves balancing two goals: food enjoyment and weight control. The goal of eating enjoyment may become spontaneously activated by cues signaling palatable food (e.g., the smell of food) and may result in diet violation and unhealthy eating (Stroebe, van Koningsbruggen, Papies, & Aarts, 2013) through different processes: first, by increasing the appeal of high-calorie, fattening food through a process of transfer of affect (Fishbach et al., 2004), and second, through inhibition of the weight-control goal. This is particularly relevant for dieters, for whom the weight-control goal is particularly important, supporting the notion that intergoal inhibition is a function of goal importance. When the eating-enjoyment goal and the weight-control goal are equally important, eating behavior reflects pursuit of both goals simultaneously via choosing multifinal means (foods) that are both tasty and healthy (Kopetz, Faber, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2011). Yet when the weight-control goal becomes prioritized over the eating-enjoyment goal, people successfully and spontaneously inhibit food temptations (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003).

Self-harm and martyrdom

Although substance use, overeating, and risky sexual behavior may have negative consequences, one could argue that the uncertainty of their consequences allows people to develop and maintain these behaviors. By contrast, physical self-harm and martyrdom have immediate consequences. Yet we argue that these behaviors also follow the general principles of goal-directed behavior and may constitute successful self-regulation.

Self-harm and martyrdom as means to active goals.

Self-harm (e.g., cutting, burning) occurs in both clinical (e.g., borderline personality disorder; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and non-clinical populations (Briere & Gil, 1998; Whitlock et al., 2011). It has typically been approached as a self-regulatory failure facilitated by heightened negative emotionality and poor executive control. However, recent findings suggest that self-harm may be a strategic response to meet emotion-regulation

goals. In two studies, women with borderline personality disorder showed increased risk tendency when the importance of the goal of emotion regulation was heightened (i.e., under distress) and when the expectancy of goal attainment was high. In contrast to previous approaches, which assumed that emotional distress impairs executive control and results in impulsive behavior, these findings show that risk behavior under emotional distress happens when cognitive resources are ample (Matusiewicz, Kopetz, Weaverling, Ellis, & Lejuez, 2015).

Intentionally killing oneself in an act of martyrdom appears to be particularly inconsistent with personal goals. Yet such behaviors may be enacted when they are perceived to serve group survival and status, which may ultimately serve the need for personal significance (Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2014).

Transfer of affect from goals to martyrdom. Those for whom the group is important and who perceive killing and dying as instrumental means to group enhancement are more likely to support violence and martyrdom. This may be possible because the affect associated with the group transfers to the means even if it involves intentionally killing oneself. Indeed, individuals who feel a sense of fusion with a group report greater willingness to fight and die for the sake of the group (Swann et al., 2014). Experimentally inducing participants to prioritize interdependence with others over independence caused an increase in their willingness to kill themselves for the sake of their group (Orehek, Sasota, Kruglanski, Dechesne, & Ridgeway, 2014).

Resolution of goals in conflict with martyrdom. Killing oneself requires one to inhibit the goal of personal survival and/or distort the consequences of martyrdom. Ironically, martyrs are willing to die in an effort to live forever. They tend to believe that they will be glorified and remembered by in-group members, and sometimes believe they will live forever under favorable conditions in the afterlife (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011).

Conclusions

Acting in a manner (e.g., smoking) that is inconsistent with other objectives (e.g., health) has typically been considered a case of self-regulation failure. However, what may appear to be failure with regard to some goals may represent success with regard to other goals (e.g., to fit in). In other words, people engage in self-defeating behaviors as means to their current goals. People do understand the harm that may result from these behaviors. However, activation of the goals they satisfy renders thoughts related to negative consequences momentarily irrelevant, facilitating their pursuit. Importantly, engagement in self-defeating

behaviors often involves effortful processes, such as the inhibition of alternative goals, rather than reflecting poor self-regulation. Therefore, to the extent that self-defeating behaviors follow the general principles of goal pursuit, they can be portrayed as self-regulatory successes rather than failures.

We do not argue that there are no failures; people can certainly fail to achieve their goals. However, failure should be determined by consideration of the goals that have been set and attempts to achieve them, rather than by evaluation of prescriptive self-regulatory norms such as the immediacy of the goals, their concreteness, or their hedonic aspect. Such normative standards cannot account for the choice to pursue self-defeating behaviors.

We believe that the evidence presented here supports this goal-directed perspective of self-defeating behavior and reflects burgeoning interest in exploring it further. Future research should investigate additional regulatory processes (e.g., planning, persistence through obstacles) associated with these behaviors. Of particular interest are the processes underlying people's representations of self-defeating behaviors as instrumental means to their goals based on their hierarchy of goals and regulatory characteristics (Scholer & Higgins, 2013).

This perspective has important implications for prevention and intervention. It suggests that self-defeating behavior may be reduced by increasing the importance of conflicting goals or increasing the accessibility and instrumentality of self-enhancing behaviors to the goal currently served by a self-defeating behavior (e.g., identifying with relevant social groups and providing individuals with social connections may reduce substance abuse; Fisher, 1996).

It is our hope that this perspective will provide a theoretical framework and will inspire future research designed to explore additional aspects of self-regulation to understand, prevent, and change self-defeating behavior.

Recommended Reading

- Baumeister, R. F., & Heatherton, T. F. (1996). Self-regulation failure: An overview. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7, 1–15. A journal article reviewing patterns of self-regulation failure.
- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1998). *On the self-regulation of behavior*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. A book about the system of guidance processes (self-regulation) that guide behavior toward and away from various kinds of mental goal representations.
- Custers, R., & Aarts, H. (2005). Positive affect as implicit motivator: On the nonconscious operation of behavioral goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 129–142. An empirical article demonstrating that nonconscious operation of behavioral goals emerges if mental representations of specific behavioral states are associated with positive affect.
- Dijksterhuis, A., & Aarts, H. (2010). Goals, attention, and (un)consciousness. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61, 467–490.

- doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100445. A review article that integrates literature from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and social cognition and discusses the relation between goals, attention, and consciousness
- Huang, J. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (2014). The selfish goal: Autonomously operating motivational structures as the proximate cause of human judgment and behavior. *Behavioral & Brain Sciences*, *37*, 121-135. A journal article (and associated commentaries) that presents a model according to which an individual's behavior is driven by goals that operate consciously and/or unconsciously and influence information processing and behavior that promote only the attainment of goal end-states (and not necessarily the overall interests of the individual), hence "the selfish goal."
- Kruglanski, A. W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishman, S., & Orehek, E. (2009). Fully committed: Suicide bombers' motivation and the quest for personal significance. *Political Psychology*, *30*, 331-557. A journal article that outlines a motivational analysis, which suggests that suicidal terrorism is motivated by a quest for significance (e.g., attempts at significance restoration, significance gain, and prevention of significance loss).
- Rawn, C. D., & Vohs, K. D. (2011). People use self-control to risk personal harm: An intra-interpersonal dilemma. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *15*, 267-289. doi:10.1177/1088868310381084. A theoretical article that suggests that people exercise self-control when they engage in self-defeating behavior (e.g., smoking, overeating) for the sake of personal acceptance.
- Scholer, A. A., Zou, X., Fujita, K., Stroessner, S. J., & Higgins, E. T. (2014). When risk seeking becomes a motivational necessity. *Motivation Science*, *1*, 91-115. An empirical article that attempts to demonstrate the importance of self-regulatory mechanisms for understanding risk-seeking behavior under loss.
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