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You cannot spend the same dollar twice: A series of studies on resolving goal conflicts

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Most of us pursue multiple goals in different domains of life at the same time. Some of these goals can have facilitative associations with each other, either because of instrumental goal relations or because of overlapping goal attainment strategies (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). For instance, the goal of earning more money is probably furthered by the goal of graduating in a MBA program, because an MBA degree is instrumental for earning more money. Similarly, the goal of practicing a foreign language in a conversation club is highly compatible with the goal of getting to know new people, because the strategies of attaining both goals overlap substantially. Previous research on goal relations has demonstrated that such facilitative relations in a person's goal system are associated with the actual engagement in goal pursuit in everyday life as well as with goal achievement (Riediger & Freund, 2004). This is an important insight, especially for researchers who develop interventions that further goal pursuit and achievement.

However, goals can also conflict with each other (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). Conflicts between goals are mostly due to resource limitations or incompatible goal attainment strategies. Time constraints are a case in point for resource-based conflicts. For instance, the goal to learn a new music instrument and to increase one's physical fitness to the degree that one is able to run the marathon conflict with each other as time for pursuing both goals is limited. For time (similar as for money) it is true that we "cannot spend the same hour (or dollar, respectively) twice." Similarly, the goal of losing weight and winning the cheeseburger eating contest conflict with each other as the goal attainment strategies of eating less (in order to lose weight) and eating a lot (during the contest) are highly incompatible. Previous research has shown that goal conflicts affect goal engagement much less than goal facilitation does. However, goal conflicts can be a source of lower psychological well-being (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005) and more psychosomatic complaints (Freund, Knecht, & Wiese, 2014). Furthermore, the likelihood of goal attainment is lower when goals conflict with each other (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013), presumably because people have to invest valuable resources into resolving the conflict that are thus not available for pursuing the goals.

The starting point of our current research on goal conflicts is the observation that older people usually experience more intergoal facilitation and fewer goal conflicts (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). Why this is the case is not yet well understood and it seems that some of the "simple explanations" do not apply (see Riediger & Freund, 2008). For instance, age differences in conflict experience are not due to the fact that older adults have more time and fewer obligations to pursue their personal goals than younger adults. Age differences in the conflict experience occurred both during the week and on weekends, so that the daily constraints for working adults did not seem to play a role. Moreover, although older adults have fewer goals than younger adult do, the restriction of the number of goals was not associated with the experience of goal conflict.

Why, then, do older people experience less conflict than younger adults? We tested in a series of three studies (Freund & Tomasik, 2015; Tomasik & Freund, 2015) whether older adults manage goal conflicts by

prioritizing one conflicting goal over the other more readily than younger adults. In other words, we expected that when older people experience goal conflict, they invest more time and effort into pursuing one of the goals and, at the same time, disengage from the other. As an example let us consider person who has only time on three evenings per week to pursue the two goals of learning new musical instrument and of running the marathon. The person might either try to accomplish both goals by practicing the piano twice a week and training for the marathon once a week, but is likely to neither learn to play the piano very well nor be ever able to succeed the entire marathon distance. Instead, the person might decide to give up the goal of learning to play the piano but instead focus on the marathon by running three times a week. This form of prioritizing requires abandoning the piano learning goal in favor of the marathon goal. This should lead to experiencing less conflict and an increase in the likelihood of achieving at least one of the goals to one's satisfaction. Given that resources sharply decrease with increasing age (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006), older adults might more often follow the motto that "one can do anything but not everything" and thus be "experts" in prioritization compared to younger adults who might believe that they have sufficient resources "to do it all."

In order to test our hypothesis of age-related differences in prioritization, we developed an empirical paradigm using two comparable tasks that conflict with each other to a similar degree for younger and older participants. Furthermore, we needed to make sure that both tasks were similarly attractive for the two age groups and that both the young and the older adults perform similarly well on them. This has been a particularly crucial stage in preparing the study materials, as we wanted to exclude the possible alternative explanation that age-related differences in prioritization could be due to age-related differences in task performance. After careful pretesting, we identified two tasks that met these criteria. The one task is an *item-sorting task*

where participants sort small pictures of items (e.g., animals) on a given dimension (e.g., life expectancy in the wild). This task taps into general knowledge, an area of cognition where younger and older adults perform similarly well. The other task was a *word riddle* in which participants have to descramble a scrambled sentence by swapping letters between words. This task taps into verbal abilities, which again is a cognitive domain that shows few if any age-related differences.

We induced a conflict between these two tasks by asking participants to solve both of them within a limited period of time (4 minutes) that is not sufficient for most of the participants. Participants were asked to solve five consecutive sets of these tasks. Between the sets, we assessed perceived task conflict and the mood of the participants.

Both studies showed that older people prioritize more by allocating more time into one task than into the other (just like the person in the example above who focuses on jogging three times a week rather than trying to accomplish learning a new musical instrument in addition). However, contrary to our expectations we did not find that prioritization was associated with experiencing less conflict. In fact, the opposite was true. Younger and older people who prioritized more also perceived more conflict between the two tasks. This finding might reflect that even when spending more time on one of the two tasks, participants might not have been able to disengage from the other but felt that they ought to have worked on both. In our example, this would be similar to the person feeling guilty and conflicted whenever she or he goes jogging for not spending any time on practicing the piano. In this sense, prioritization might in the short term come with "psychological costs."

To test this explanation, we conducted a third study (Tomasik & Freund, 2015) in which we extended the temporal scope from about one hour to five consecutive days and measured perceived conflict both concurrently and retrospectively. In other words, we did not only ask about the currently perceived

conflict when people were working on the tasks, but also asked them to judge how much conflict they had perceived the day before. With the retrospective measurement, we hoped to avoid that current frustration of not being able to solve both tasks might lead to experiencing goal conflict.

By extending the study design from five rounds to five days, we also had to adapt the tasks to be more meaningful and involving. We decided to employ a learning task in which participants were asked to collect and learn information that was presented on 40 different flash cards each day. 20 flash cards contained information on "poverty in the world" and 20 flash cards were about "healthy nutrition." These two topics are similarly interesting for both younger and older adults. Conflict was again created by limiting the amount of time that participants were allowed to study the cards. After time was over, participants took a short quiz on the topics related to "poverty in the world" and "healthy nutrition." The number of correct answers directly translated into a monetary donation for a charity related to either poverty or nutrition.

As we had expected, prioritization was again related to experiencing more conflict in the situation when participants tried to solve both tasks. However, when asked retrospectively about the conflict they had perceived on preceding day, higher prioritization was related to *less* perceived conflict. Hence, the benefits of prioritization seem to need some time to develop and people experience these benefits only from a temporal distance.

Taken together our three studies suggest the following dynamics: When people are confronted with two conflicting tasks, they prioritize more, and the more they do this, the more conflict they experience. This is true for both the young and the older adults but older people seem to be particularly good at prioritizing. Interestingly, prioritization is associated with the "psychological cost" of not being able to meet all goals, at least in the short run. However, with increasing time from the conflict situation, prioritization leads to lower perceived conflict. Given

that older adults prioritize more than younger adults do, they might have an advantage in solving goal conflicts.

Although the current studies did not involve engagement and disengagement from conflicting health-related goals, one could speculate about the conclusions that can be drawn for from a health psychology perspective. First, time seems to play a crucial role in disengagement from conflicting or unattainable goals. Second, the ability to effectively solve goal conflicts – and thus to mitigate the health-related consequences that result from it – might turn out as an important developmental gain on which interventions targeting health-related behaviors in older adults could focus.

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