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Choice Based on Goals

STIJN M. J. VAN OSSELAER * sosselaer@rsm.nl
RSM Erasmus University, T10-07, 3062 PA, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

SURESH RAMANATHAN
University of Chicago

MARGARET C. CAMPBELL
University of Colorado

JOEL B. COHEN
University of Florida

JEANNETTE K. DALE
PAUL M. HERR
University of Colorado

CHRIS JANISZEWSKI
University of Florida

ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI
University of Maryland

ANGELA Y. LEE
Northwestern University

STEPHEN J. READ
University of Southern California

J. EDWARD RUSSO
Cornell University

NADER T. TAVASSOLI
London Business School

Abstract

This article introduces a goal-based view of consumer choice in which (1) choice is influenced by three classes of goals (consumption goals, criterion goals, and process goals), (2) goals are cognitively represented, and (3) the impact of a goal on choice depends on its activation. For each class of goals, we discuss how goal activation is influenced by direct (subconscious) goal priming, by spreading activation from choice options, from other goals, and from the context, and by goal (non-)achievement. Opportunities for modeling goal-based choice, the integration of emotions in a theory of goal-based choice, and relationships with dual-process theories of decision making are discussed.

Keywords: goal-based choice, goal activation, consumer choice

* Corresponding author.
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The study of consumer choice has traditionally taken a multi-attribute utility perspective. According to this perspective, the utility of a choice option is equal to the sum of the utilities of the attributes that comprise the option. The choice of a specific option depends on a comparison of these summed utilities. Inherent in this perspective are three assumptions. First, consumers assign value to attributes or attribute levels. Second, the utility associated with a specific attribute or attribute level is relatively stable. Third, only the utility associated with the option's attributes contributes to the options' overall evaluations and, consequently, to the choice among them (i.e., people select the option with the highest attribute-based utility).

The above assumptions have been repeatedly challenged. For example, there is considerable evidence that the utility of specific attributes or attribute levels is not fixed, but highly context-dependent (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Moreover, consumers often fail to choose the option with the highest attribute-based utility. Choices are also influenced by the ease with which a decision can be justified to others (Simonson, 1989), the desire to minimize the time and effort devoted to the choice (Bettman et al., 1998), and the tendency to avoid negative emotion during the alternative evaluation process (Luce et al., 2001).

In this article, we argue that many, seemingly unrelated, deviations from multiattribute utility theory can be reconciled if one adopts a goal-based view of consumer choice. Specifically, we argue that choice depends on three classes of goals; consumption goals, criterion goals, and process goals. These goals are cognitively represented in memory and hence have the potential to be primed, to inhibit and facilitate each other, and to change over time in their activation levels. This interaction of goal activations, both within and across classes of goals, permits a more flexible representation of the evaluation of options and the choices among them. Our multi-class, goal-based approach to choice suggests several issues that could benefit from further study.

1. Three Types of Goals

Goals are often described in terms of the desirable state of affairs that people intend to attain through action. Consumer choice can be conceptualized as choosing a means (e.g., a product) to achieve three types of ends; consumption goals, criterion goals, and process goals. Utility is derived from the achievement of these goals.

1.1. Consumption Goals

Consumers choose products for the benefits they afford, not for the attributes they contain. For example, consumers purchase beverages that taste good, refresh, or make them more alert, rather than purchase beverages that contain sugar, are cold, or are caffeinated. These consumption benefits can be thought of as goals afforded by the consumption of products. The value of a product is tied to its ability to satisfy consumption goals, not to its ability to deliver a collection of attributes. Although this distinction is representational in nature, it is valuable because it allows for any brand name, ingredient, feature, other attribute, or combination thereof to serve as a means that can become associated

with a consumption goal. To the extent that consumption goals are context dependent, a specific means can suggest a different value in each context. That is, the value of a product or any of its elements is labile across contexts not because of the choice set (Simonson, 1989) or the mapping of subjective scale values (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981), but because these means are differentially associated with contextually-dependent consumption goals.

1.2. Criterion Goals

Consumers often fail to choose the product that gives them the most consumption pleasure. Part of this failure, of course, is due to consumers' limited processing capacities (Simon, 1955). However, other deviations stem from the fact that maximizing the personal pleasure of consuming or experiencing the chosen option is not the only criterion for a good choice outcome. Choice outcomes are also evaluated according to other criterion goals, such as justifying a choice to others (Simonson, 1989), expressing uniqueness or other traits important in self-presentation (Puntoni and Tavassoli, 2004), increasing anticipated satisfaction (Shiv and Huber, 2000), or gathering information (Ariely and Levav, 2000).

1.3. Process Goals

In addition to consumption and other criterion goals, whose satisfaction depends on what option is chosen, consumers also strive to satisfy goals that are related to the choice process, independent of what option is chosen. For example, consumers may strive to make the choice quickly or with the least possible effort (Bettman et al., 1998), to avoid negative emotions due to painful tradeoffs during the decision process (Luce et al., 2001), to enjoy the decision process (Cziksentmihalyi and Nakamura, 1999), or to make sure the choice process enhances the coherence of the information weighed in the decision (Russo et al., 1998; Simon et al., 2004).

2. Goals as Knowledge Structures

Whereas motivation has often been treated as separate from cognition, research by Kruglanski and others (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Read, 1987; Schank and Abelson, 1977), considers goals as knowledge structures. Just like other entities in declarative memory, goals are connected to other concepts in memory (e.g., means, other goals, and contexts) through excitatory and inhibitory associations. Goals can send and receive activation over outgoing and incoming associations, and they differ in accessibility depending on their level of activation in memory. Importantly, goals that are more highly activated (and hence more accessible) have a stronger impact on behavior.

Beyond integrating motivation and cognition into a common representational structure, the conceptualization of goals as knowledge structures suggests a departure from the traditional, more static view of goals. The study of declarative memory has shown the activation and accessibility of concepts in memory to be highly variable over time. Accessibility of

any concept is highly dependent on the recency and frequency of activation of the particular concept or of related concepts (through spreading activation; Anderson et al., 2004). This suggests that the influence of specific goals on behavior is highly variable, highly context-dependent, and heavily subject to the processes of learning and forgetting.

3. Implications of the Goal-Based View of Consumer Choice

3.1. Consumption Goals

According to the goal-based view, consumption benefits are not thought of in terms of stable importance weights. Instead, benefits are goals whose impact on consumer choice depends, at least in part, on the momentary accessibility of the goals' representations. Options that satisfy more highly activated goals are evaluated more positively and are more likely to be chosen (Brendl et al., 2003). Further, goal accessibility can be influenced in many, often subtle ways (Bargh et al., 1996; Shah and Kruglanski, 2002).

First, goals can be primed directly. That is, exposing people to a goal, even subconsciously, will activate the goal and will increase the impact of that goal on behavior. For example, participants surreptitiously primed with an achievement goal outperformed those who were not primed on a series of verbal tasks (Bargh et al., 2001). In the consumer choice realm, Ramanathan and Menon (2004) showed that participants primed with a hedonic goal were much more likely to choose cookies over grapes. Thus, direct priming of a consumption benefit, merely by mentioning or showing the benefit, can dramatically increase the impact of that benefit dimension on choice.

Second, goal accessibility, and hence benefit importance, can be influenced by the activation or accessibility of other goals. For example, Shah and Kruglanski (2002) showed that subliminally priming an alternative task goal to a currently pursued focal goal led to poorer performance and lower persistence on the focal task. The strength of this inter-goal activation effect depended on the perceived relationship between the two goals-goals that were substitutes for each other or those that were unrelated led to inhibitory effects, whereas goals that facilitated each other led to an accentuation effect. Similar effects have been found in the consumer realm (Brendl et al., 2003). Thus, merely making one benefit accessible to consumers will not only increase the impact of that benefit on choice, but will decrease the impact of other substitute benefits at the same level of abstraction due to inhibition and also increase the impact of benefits with which the primed benefit has a means-end relationship through a facilitation process.

Third, goals can be made more accessible in memory by spreading activation from means. Shah and Kruglanski (2003) found that the priming of means such as "study" or "exercise" can activate goals that are served by those means, such as "being educated" or "being fit," leading to faster recognition of the latter as personal traits. Thus, the subliminal priming of an activity led to increased accessibility of a trait goal that is satisfied by the activity. The strength of this effect depends on the extent of *multifinality*. That is, the increase in accessibility of any goal due to activation of a means is reduced as the means is linked to a larger number of goals (Kruglanski et al., 2002).

These findings may provide insight into the processes responsible for mere exposure effects and impulse purchases. For example, when consumers encounter products, spreading activation from means to goals activates the consumption goals the product has historically satisfied. As a result, merely encountering products makes those products more attractive and more likely to be chosen. Thus, spreading activation from means to goals makes people more likely to engage in the unplanned buying of products.

Interestingly, exposure to a means does not always lead to activation of a reinforcing goal and, subsequently, an increased tendency to execute the means. Means can also activate the goals that they frustrate. For example, Fishbach et al. (2003) found that, for people who perceived themselves to be successful at controlling their weight, fattening food primes such as "cake" or "chocolate" led to faster reaction times for words related to weight watching ("thin," "slim"). These results suggest that subliminal priming with means (e.g., fattening foods) led to increased accessibility of goals (e.g., weight watching) whose achievement was frustrated by the means. The effects of priming a means on the activation of goals that are frustrated as well as goals that are satisfied by that means may indicate that if the choice of a means covaries with the level of achievement of a goal, the means and the goal will be associated regardless of whether the relationship is facilitative or inhibitory.

Fourth, goal accessibility can be influenced by contextual cues. For example, research by Bargh and colleagues (1995) suggests that men who associate power with sex will automatically activate sex-related goals when they are afforded power in a situation.[1] Similarly, it should be expected that when consumers find themselves in a particular situation or context, the goals that have historically been salient in that situation will be automatically activated. Hence, they will have more impact on choices made in that context. For example, merely being in a bar might make the goal of loosening up more accessible, leading consumers to drink more beer than they would have, had they been in another situation where beer was as readily available (e.g., at home). Of course, such automatic activation usually suits consumers quite well, as similar goals tend to be appropriate across occasions in a particular context. Still, there are some occasions where the goal that consumers have learned to associate with a context may lead to suboptimal choices (e.g., the case of a student who is in a bar and has to take an exam the next morning).

Fifth, the goal-based view of consumer choice suggests that goal accessibility depends on previous goal achievement or non-achievement. Benefits that have not been satisfied on previous occasions should become more important over time whereas benefits that have been satisfied should become less important in future choices. This is not surprising when the benefits involved are consumption goals such as satisfying hunger or quenching thirst. However, the role of previous achievement or non-achievement is not so obvious for other consumption goals. For example, does the relaxation provided by listening to a beautiful opera make relaxation a less important goal when choosing what to do after the fat lady sounds her last note?

Interestingly, recent work by Fishbach and Dhar (2004) suggests that activation and pursuit of goals is not just influenced by previous achievement or non-achievement. They find that mere progress toward achieving a goal may increase the pursuit of other, substitute goals. This finding suggests consumers are easily distracted, whereby initiating the consumption

or use of a product conjures up alternative goals that could halt the consumption of that product in favor of other, alternative products.

3.2. Criterion Goals

Criterion goals such as being able to justify one's choice to others (Simonson, 1989), making a choice that allows one to make a good impression (Ariely and Levav, 2000; Puntoni and Tavassoli, 2004), or making choices that allow consumers to gather information (Ariely and Levav, 2000) may also influence the choice of an option. According to the goal-based view, the impact of these criterion goals should depend on their activation and accessibility in memory. In addition, the activation of criterion goals can be automatic.

It should be possible to activate criterion goals in the same ways as consumption goals. First, criterion goals can be primed directly. For example, advertisements or salespeople can make a direct reference to a consumer's need to justify why the chosen option constitutes a good choice or can inquire about the impression a chosen product will make on others. Second, activation of a criterion goal may depend on the activation of other, competing criterion goals. For example, if a consumer with a severe headache tries to choose the headache medicine that is most likely to relieve the headache quickly and completely, activation of a learning goal will be inhibited and choice of a new, unfamiliar headache medicine becomes unlikely. Third, criterion goals can be activated by spreading activation from means. For example, presenting consumers with an easy-to-justify choice option may itself make the justification goal more salient, increasing the likelihood that the easily justified option is chosen.

Fourth, criterion goals can be activated through spreading activation from context cues. This suggestion is consistent with recent work by Puntoni and Tavassoli (2004). In several experiments, they demonstrate how the mere presence of a person of the opposite sex can increase the accessibility of an impression management goal and can increase recall of items that are related to the social desirability goal. Extended to choice, this research suggests that the mere presence of others may change choices by activating certain criterion goals.

Finally, the activation and importance of different criterion goals may depend on previous and current levels of goal achievement. Although there is little research on this topic, we can pose some interesting questions. For example, does impression management become less important in one situation if one has recently made a good impression in another situation? The answer to this question is far from obvious. To the extent that previous success at achieving a criterion goal indicates a talent for satisfying that criterion at a minimal cost, consumers may be inclined to increase the importance of that goal. For example, past success at impression management may lead consumers to value impression management more. Success at achieving a criterion goal may also lessen its importance. For example, choosing an easy-to-justify option, and subsequent success at justifying one's choice, may lead consumers to worry less about justifying their choices in the future.

3.3. Process Goals

Process goals are related to the process of choosing itself. The importance of process goals has been shown in several consumer behavior and psychology research streams. For

example, Luce and her colleagues (Luce et al., 2001) have shown that the goal of minimizing negative emotion during a decision process can dramatically alter the impact of different attributes in choice. Similarly, minimizing the time and effort involved in a decision can alter choice outcomes (Bettman et al., 1998). Other process goals that may play a role in choice are the goal to preserve one's beliefs during the choice process (Sanbonmatsu et al., 1998) and the goal to maximize belief coherence during the choice process (Russo et al., 1998; Simon et al., 2004).

An analysis of the activation owing to priming and spreading activation is undoubtedly too simple to explain all choice phenomena related to process goals. For example, process goals affect search, attention, and decision strategies that are likely to involve much higher-level strategic processing (Bettman et al., 1998). However, such an analysis may still raise interesting questions and yield worthwhile hypotheses.

First, it is important to investigate the extent to which process goals can be primed. For example, will prime words related to hurrying up or slowing down lead to changes in the speed and result of a choice process? Can a coherence goal be primed or is coherence of the beliefs and perhaps goals involved in a decision a constant feature of any decision process? Supportive of the latter possibility, recurrent connectionist models suggest that the process goal of coherence is hard-wired, a direct result of the way choice options, goals, and evaluations are connected and activated (Simon et al., 2004).

A second question is whether or not the activation of process goals depends on the activation of other goals. It seems likely that activating one process goal leads to the reduced impact of other process goals but only if the process goals are substitutes. In some situations, process goals may be related as means to ends. For example, the goal to avoid negative emotion during the decision process may be achieved by minimizing the time spent making the choice. In such cases, it is possible that ends (e.g., avoid negative emotion) activate means (e.g., minimize time spent making the choice).

A third way in which process goals may be activated is via spreading activation from choice options. Such effects may be direct. For example, one may readily imagine that the goal of avoiding negative emotions is activated directly when consumers think about a choice option (e.g., buying life insurance). Other effects may be more indirect. Thus, thinking about a choice option (e.g., beer), may activate several incoherent consumption goals (e.g., consequences of drinking beer to be approached versus avoided), which in turn may lead to activation of the coherence goal. Coherence in this respect seems to be a special goal, because coherence is a characteristic of a whole goal system, not a characteristic of a single means or consumption goal.

Fourth, process goals may be activated through context cues. For example, the goal to minimize the time spent making a choice may be activated subconsciously by the agitated physical demeanor of a salesperson, thereby influencing the nature of a consumer's choice process and its outcome.

Fifth, it is possible that the activation and impact of process goals depends on previous goal achievement. In some cases, this seems likely. For example, failing to minimize effort on one decision may make minimizing effort more important during the next choice process. However, in other cases, such an effect is far from obvious. For example, it is not clear that successfully avoiding negative emotion during one choice makes one more tolerant of

negative emotion during the next choice, or that achieving coherence among beliefs during once choice process reduces the need to do so on the next choice.

4. Expanding and Enhancing a Theory of Goal-Based Choice

This article introduces a view of choice as determined by goals whose impact depends on their activation in memory. This view differs from more traditional ways of looking at choice because it focuses on consumption benefits (goals) instead of attributes of the choice option (e.g., product characteristics such as brand names or features). Because the impact of goals on choice depends on their activation, and because goal activation is variable and can be influenced in at least five ways, the goal-based view takes an inherently dynamic perspective on choice. In addition, the goal-based view integrates three different types of goals; consumption goals, criterion goals, and process goals. Interestingly, while there has been some research on the activation of consumption goals, the same cannot be said of criterion and process goals. In fact, it is far from clear that the five goal activation factors operate in the same way for criterion and process goals as they do for consumption goals. In sum, we believe the framework of choice based on goals provides a useful starting point towards a comprehensive theory of consumer choice. However, a number of other issues have to be addressed.

4.1. Modeling

Beyond the notions that goals are concepts in memory that can be activated directly, via priming, and indirectly, via associations from other concepts, the cognitive psychology of the goal-based view remains largely unspecified. It is not clear what type of activation spreads among the goal concepts. For example, are the associations used to spread activation the same ones along which commitment or affective properties are transferred (Kruglanski et al., 2002)? It is not clear how these transfers work or how incoming influences are combined. Some of these ambiguities may be resolved by constructing formal models of goal-based choice that make the underlying assumptions about the choice process explicit and testable. Some possible points of departure for such models are modern descendants of classical spreading activation theories of declarative memory (Anderson et al., 2004), feed-forward connectionist models used to describe product evaluation in single-goal situations (van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001), and recurrent connectionist models of preference construction and impression formation (Simon et al., 2004).

4.2. Dynamics

Whereas the goal-based view on choice is dynamic, in the sense that goal activation is not constant but depends on direct priming and incoming associations, there are many remaining questions regarding the behavior of the system over time. If goals activate each other, goals activate means, and means activate goals, then it is possible that activation reverberates. For example, if goal A activates goal B, the spread of activation may flow on from goal B to

goal C or even back to goal A. This process, which has not been addressed in the literature on goal priming, requires time and a mechanism for the system to settle.

Relatedly, the goal-based framework outlined in the previous sections does not account for learning. Both feedforward and recurrent connectionist models, if equipped with simple learning rules such as the delta rule (Read and Montoya, 1999), seem well-suited for modeling how associations between concepts change over time. Although it should be important to know how goal-based choice behavior changes over time, the learning processes that underlie these changes remain largely outside the scope of the literature on goals as knowledge structures.

4.3. Dual Systems

Evaluating choice options along multiple goal dimensions having highly variable activations has the flavor of a relatively elaborate constructive process, even if it takes place subconsciously. Dual systems theories of attitudes, reasoning, and associative learning (Chaiken and Trope, 1999; van Osselaer et al., 2004) suggest that a simpler process may affect choice of previously chosen options as well. It is possible that, over time, a choice option also develops a simple direct association to an overall evaluation. Such a single-association attitude could then be used to quickly evaluate the choice option without assessment of specific goals. Such a process would be most likely to influence choices involving highly familiar choice options, whose goal-based evaluations have been relative stable in the past (e.g., because they had always been chosen and consumed in the same situation), and when processing motivation or resources are scarce at the time of choice.

Single-association attitudes could also lead to interesting effects on choice. For example, consider a situation in which beer and water are the choice options. In the past, loosening-up had been the focal goal in those situations with refreshment serving as a background goal. Whenever beer had been consumed in those situations, satisfaction had been high, primarily because of beer's superior ability to help one loosen-up. Thus, beer developed a strong direct association with a positive overall evaluation. When, on the next occasion, loosening-up is much less important than refreshment, a goal better satisfied by water than by beer, consumers might choose beer if motivation or opportunity to process were low. They would choose water if the motivation and opportunity to process were high. It would be important to investigate the existence, role, and characteristics of such fast and simple single-association processes.

4.4. Emotion

As a number of researchers in consumer behavior and psychology have shown, a theory of choice is incomplete unless it speaks to the role of emotion in judgments and decision making (Isen, 1997; Lee and Sternthal, 1999; Pham et al., 2001). Emotions may play many roles in goal-based choice. For example, avoiding emotional pain need not be the only operative process goal. Other emotional process goals (e.g., maximizing fun or surprise during the choice process) may operate during choice. Another key issue is how emotion

and goals interact. Presumably, achievement and non-achievement of goals have emotional consequences (Chartrand, 2000). In the other direction, mood and specific emotions may impact the activation of different goals. Thus far, although some research exists on the intersection of goals and emotion per se (Bagozzi et al., 2000) we are unaware of work addressing the emotional aspects of the view of goals as knowledge structures. Finally, in addition to looking at interactions between emotions and goals, questions may be raised about the representation and functioning of emotions themselves. For example, it is unclear if emotions, like goals, can be seen as knowledge structures represented in memory that can be subconsciously primed and activated through spreading activation.

5. Conclusion

We have briefly reviewed how consumer choice may be influenced by three classes of goals (consumption goals, criterion goals, and process goals) that are cognitively represented in memory. Whereas research on goals as knowledge structures gives relatively clear indications how direct (subconscious) priming, associations from other concepts in memory, and goal (non-)achievement may influence the impact of consumption goals on choice, the influences of these factors on criterion and process goals remain much less clear. In addition, the framework of goal-based choice remains highly incomplete. Future research in this area might focus on formal specification of the framework, learning of goal associations, the integration of affect in the framework, and exploration of the existence of multiple processes in choice that may differ in their reliance on situation-specific goal activations.

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Note

1. It should be noted that in this and several other examples of situational activation of goals, it is very difficult to distinguish the situational features from goals. These experiments can often be interpreted in terms of goals activating other goals.

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