

Self-regulation and conflict resolution

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To resolve conflict, it helps if opposing parties can agree on the actual origins of the conflict between them (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). With this view, research on self-regulation has identified particular modes of thought that may hamper or facilitate an individual's capacity to accurately perceive and accept reality. More specifically, researchers have discovered certain self-regulatory modes of thought that help people set goals in accordance with their past experiences and their perceived chances of success (Oettingen, 1999), and other self-regulatory modes of thought that help people attain these goals in an effective and practical manner (Gollwitzer, 1999).

SELF-REGULATORY THOUGHT IN GOAL SETTING AND GOAL IMPLEMENTATION

The self-regulation of goal pursuit has recently received much attention in social and personality psychology (for summaries, see Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001; Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996). Research on the topic suggests that when people set appropriate goals and make plans for how to attain them, they are more likely to be effective in pursuing and reaching their goals. Effective strategies—sometimes called “meta-cognitive” or “self-regulatory” strategies—of goal setting (Oettingen, 1999) and goal implementation (Gollwitzer, 1999) have been developed, with demonstrated success in strengthening goal commitment and increasing the rate of goal attainment. While these strategies often pertain to commonplace goals such as improving one's study habits or health behaviors, there is also evidence that they can be applied to the sphere of interpersonal conflict resolution and peace-building.

Self-Regulation of Goal-Setting

Oettingen (1999) proposed the self-regulatory strategy of *mental contrasting* to help people set goals that are in line with their experiences in the past. In this strategy, people are asked to mentally contrast a desired future behavior or outcome with negative aspects of the present reality (obstacles, hindrances, temptations, and the like) that may stand in the way of realizing the desired future. When individuals are led to simultaneously access these two contradictory cognitions—cognitions pertaining to the desired future on the one hand and to present obstacles to its realization on the other—this ‘fantasy-reality contrast’ makes individuals feel compelled to act. This impetus, in turn, prompts individuals to question whether engaging in realizing the desired future is feasible and worthwhile. Individuals answer this question by assessing their chances of future success. When individuals perceive that their chances of realizing the desired future are high, they are likely to firmly adopt the goal to realize the desired future. If, however, chances of realizing the desired future are perceived to be low, people will relinquish pursuing the

realization of the desired future.

Oettingen (2000) and Oettingen, Pak, and Schnetter (2001) compared the selfregulatory strategies of mental contrasting with two alternative self-regulatory strategies of goal setting: *indulging* (the self-regulatory strategy of only thinking about the desired future) and *dwelling* (the self-regulatory strategy of solely thinking about impeding obstacles). Results of this research indicate that people who indulge in a desired future fail to produce strong goal commitments that could propel them toward attaining their desired future. Rather, independent of their actual expectations, people who indulge are only half-hearted in their goal commitment, and are therefore hindered from taking decisive action. Interestingly, dwelling about present hindrances or obstacles that impede the desired future produce the same half-hearted commitment and indecisive action among participants, again independent of participants' expectations.

This pattern of results has been observed in studies pertaining to various life domains: health (for example, quitting smoking), achievement (such as excelling in school), and interpersonal goals (for example, taking on social responsibility). The effects of the three self-regulatory strategies—mental contrasting, indulging, and dwelling—were also analyzed in setting goals regarding conflict resolution. For example, in one of the studies (Oettingen et al., 2001, Study 3), college students were asked to name their most pressing interpersonal conflict—for example, not getting along with one's roommate—and to indicate the perceived chances that this conflict could be resolved. Thereafter, each participant was asked to list four benefits of happily resolving this interpersonal problem (for example, having no more harsh feelings in the relationship with one's roommate), and to list four current obstacles that stood in the way of a happy ending (for example, harboring resentment for the roommate's actions in the past). Following this exercise, three experimental conditions were established. In the mental contrast group, participants were instructed to imagine two of the four benefits of a happy ending that they had listed, and then to focus on two of the four current obstacles that they had written down; imagining both these elements, the benefits and the obstacles, induced the fantasy-reality contrast. In the indulging group, participants were only asked to mentally elaborate the four listed benefits of a happy ending. In the dwelling group, participants were only asked to mentally elaborate the four listed obstacles of the present reality.

To measure goal commitment, participants were contacted two weeks later and asked when they had begun working to resolve their stated problem. In the mental contrast group, participants who perceived they had a high chance of achieving their goal acted without delay, while those who perceived their chances of success as being low postponed or refrained from acting. Participants in the mental contrast group thus behaved in line with their perceptions of success. By contrast, participants in the indulging and dwelling groups delayed acting on their goals independent of whether their expectations of success were high or low. In these groups, participants took longer than mental contrast participants to tackle their goals when perceived chances of success were high, and acted *more* quickly than mental contrast participants when perceived chances of success were low. These results indicate that indulging and dwelling leads individuals to set and strive for goals without due consideration of past experiences (as reflected in

one's perceived chances of success). Instead, indulging and dwelling trigger individuals to make inappropriate goal commitments: people invest either too little (in light of high chances of success) or too much (in light of low chances of success).

The abovementioned research on mental contrasting, indulging, and dwelling measured goal commitment with respect to its cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects, using self-reports and observations made by independent raters. The pattern of results held true no matter whether the desired future was self-chosen or suggested by others, or whether commitment was measured in the short term (right after the experiment) or longer term (several weeks after the experiment) (Oettingen et al., 2001). Further, this research suggests that mental contrasting is an easily applied self-regulatory tool, as the described effects are obtained even when participants elaborate the desired future and current reality only briefly (for example, are asked to name and elaborate only one benefit of the desired future and only one obstacle).

More recent laboratory experiments have addressed the question of *how* mental contrasting leads to expectancy-dependent goal commitment. At least two possibilities have been suggested. First, mental contrasting makes an individual's future and current reality affectively distinct—that is, the desired future is evaluated as clearly positive and the current situation as clearly negative (Scherer, 2001). This heightened affective differentiation between the future and the present facilitates the emergence of a necessity to act (that is, the individual recognizes that he or she must change the negative reality in order to reach the positive future). Second, mental contrasting helps individuals process expectancy-related information, evidenced by the fact that participants who undergo the mental contrast procedure demonstrate improved recall of negative feedback that is relevant to the problem they want to change. This cognitive benefit is also what likely makes mental contrasting an effective facilitator of goal attainment (Pak, 2002).

The findings reported above imply that mental contrasting can be used to make people set conflict-resolution goals that are in line with perceived chances of success. For example, if the given power structures are such that certain goals are out of reach, mental contrasting should make people refrain from committing themselves to these goals, and people will not waste valuable time and resources on them. Or, if past experiences with the other side are such that trusting is rather risky, mental contrasting should be an effective self-protective strategy, because it prevents people from making goal commitments that may lead to frustration and disappointment. In other words, people can use mental contrasting to select those conflict resolution goals that, however modest, stand a good chance of being achieved, and to refrain from commitment to more risky, lofty goals. Compared to the indulging and dwelling mental strategies, which incline people to invest too much when perceived chances of success are low and too little when perceived chances are high, mental contrasting puts people at an advantage when it comes to choosing and investing in goals that can indeed be realized. Thus, mental contrasting is particularly welcome in times when dreamers and radical visionaries dominate the public debate.

Self-Regulation of Goal Implementation

While mental contrasting is a powerful self-regulatory tool for setting realistic (expectancy-dependent) goals, committing oneself to feasible conflict-resolution goals is only the first step on the intricate and effortful path to goal attainment. Even if people set goals in line with the chances they perceive for success, a host of hindrances can derail their pursuit of these goals. One effective self-regulatory strategy for promoting goal attainment in the face of obstacles is making plans. Gollwitzer (1993) distinguishes between *goal intentions* that relate to wanting to perform a certain behavior or reach a particular outcome (for example, “I want to improve my relationship with my roommate”) and *implementation intentions* that have to do with planning ahead so as to overcome critical situations that may impede goal attainment (for example, “And if he provokes me, I will hold my temper”).

Empirical research (summarized in Gollwitzer, 1999) has found strong support for the effectiveness of furnishing one’s goal intentions with respective implementation intentions. In field experiments, it has been observed that participants who form implementation intentions for goals that are difficult to attain are better at reaching them. There are various types of obstacles that implementation intentions may assist individuals in overcoming. First, implementation intentions help when goal-directed action is inconvenient. For instance, when people intend to write a requested report over a holiday, implementation intentions raise goal completion rate from approximately 30% to 70% (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997). Second, implementation intentions help people to complete unpleasant-to-perform or anxiety-arousing goals, such as behaviors relating to health promotion and disease prevention like regular breast self-examination, cervical cancer screening, or resumption of functional activity after joint replacement surgery (Sheeran & Orbell, 2000; Orbell & Sheeran, 2000). Third, implementation intentions facilitate goal attainment when forgetting goal-directed behavior is likely (for example, taking vitamins regularly; Sheeran & Orbell, 1999) or when it is important to keep deadlines and to comply with instructions (Oettingen, Hönig, & Gollwitzer, 2000, Studies 2 and 3). Lastly, people who have problems with the control of goal-directed behavior (for example, heroin addicts during withdrawal or patients having a frontal lobe injury) also benefit from forming implementation intentions. Findings suggest that forming implementation intentions is not only an effective self-regulatory tool, but also a technique that is easy to use. Moreover, it does not matter whether implementation intentions are assigned or self-set, formed publicly or privately, or written down or only imagined.

IMPLICATIONS OF GOAL-IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In turning to the question of how to apply planning techniques to peace-building and interpersonal conflict resolution, recent studies demonstrate that in this sphere as well, implementation intentions are highly beneficial. For example, in a study on identity threat (see Gollwitzer, Bayer, & McCulloch, in press), participants who made back-up

plans in support of getting to know a stranger were more successful in getting to know her than participants who did not make such plans, even when participants were subjected to a severe identity threat that made the goal of taking the perspective of the stranger more difficult. In this study, participants were pre-selected as highly committed law students, and were asked to set themselves the goal of being friendly and accommodating to a stranger whom they were going to meet at an upcoming social hour (that is, they were asked to agree with the conversation topics chosen by the stranger, an attractive female undergraduate student). Half of the participants were in addition asked to make an if-then plan on how to achieve this goal (for example, “If she suggests a conversation topic, then I will accommodate her right away”). Prior to meeting the stranger, half of the participants with plans and half of the participants without plans were subjected to a severe identity threat regarding their claims of being likely to become successful lawyers, and half of the participants in either group were not subjected to this identity threat. When it came to meeting the stranger, identity threatened participants who had not formed implementation intentions failed to accommodate the stranger’s interests. By comparison, the effect of identity threat was not apparent with participants who had formed implementation intentions. Whether or not participants with implementation intentions were subjected to an identity threat, they still managed to accommodate the stranger’s interests. This finding suggests that in the sphere of conflict resolution and peace-building, where identity threat is a formidable obstacle to the goal of accommodating the other, implementation intentions may help actors achieve this type of interpersonal goal.

Negotiation experiments comparing the effects of ‘loss frames’ and ‘gain frames’ on interpersonal behavior also demonstrate that implementation intentions facilitate cooperative and fair behavior—a finding that, like the findings relating to identity threat and accommodating others, may also be useful in understanding how conflicting parties may achieve peace-related goals. In two negotiation experiments (Trötschel & Gollwitzer, 2002), pairs of participants were asked to act as representatives of two opposing countries who disputed their ownership of an island located near both countries. In the first study, one of the negotiators in the pair was instructed to operate under a loss frame (winning autonomy over one or more regions was construed as cutting one’s losses, a deviation from the expected goal of winning it all). The other negotiator was instructed to operate under a gain frame (winning one or more regions was, for this negotiator, construed as making a profit, in comparison to the anticipated outcome of winning nothing). In the second study, in some pairs both negotiators were instructed to operate under a loss frame and in other pairs both negotiators were instructed to operate under a gain frame. In both studies, loss frames led to more unfair and less integrative negotiation outcomes than gain frames. This was even true when participants had set themselves the pro-social goals to be fair and cooperative. However, when participants had furnished these goals with respective implementation intentions that spelled out when and how they intended to act fairly and cooperatively in a critical situation, the negative effects of loss framing were reduced to zero.

The findings of the implementation intentions studies presented here suggest that pro-social goals such as taking the perspective of others and negotiating in a fair and

cooperative manner can be protected from unwanted intrusions by furnishing these goals with respective plans. This seems to be true no matter whether these intrusions originate in the person (self-concerns and self-defensiveness) or come from outside (the given situation asks for cutting losses rather than for making profits). While the goals of peacebuilding are far-reaching and complex, these techniques, which have been shown effective in real and experimental settings, may prove useful to conflicting parties who share peace-related goals.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to ameliorating social conflict and promoting cooperation, it does not suffice to solely envision a positive future of cooperation and harmony. Neither does it suffice to extensively reflect on those negative aspects of reality that impede attainment of the desired future. Both options—indulging in fantasies about the future or dwelling on present obstacles—lead individuals to set inappropriate goals that are either too challenging or not challenging enough. To be effective in formulating serviceable goals, individuals should contrast a desired future with the impediments posed by the present, negative reality. This special mode of self-regulatory thought guarantees that people will set goals in line with given potentialities.

Setting oneself feasible goals, however, does not yet mean one will attain them. Rather, it takes a special effort to regulate one's goal pursuits in such a way that these goals will not fall prey to hindrances and distractions. One such easy-to-apply and effective self-regulatory strategy is the formation of implementation intentions. The goalsetting strategy of mental contrasting and the goal implementation strategy of planning can also be used in tandem. Mental contrasting and forming implementation intentions should work especially well together when obstacles that are identified during the mental contrasting procedure are subsequently used as cues for goal-directed action.

The social nature of the human being has been described as an irony of “unsociable sociability”—what Immanuel Kant termed “ungesellige Geselligkeit” (Immanuel Kant, 1784/1975). Humans, by nature, express themselves in social groupings and connections, but by that same nature, there are inevitable conflicts that threaten to break these social groupings apart. Given this view, it seems wise to approach social conflicts with a contrasting rather than a fantasizing or dwelling mode of thought, as contrasting respects the existence of future obstacles to peace. Supplementing pro-social goals with effective plans acknowledges that humans need to be prepared for all kinds of unsociable surprises.

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