Holding On or Letting Go? Persistence and Disengagement in Goal Striving

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Abstract

Goals shape our personal identities, structure our everyday lives, regulate our behavior, and thus are in fact one of the most important sources of performance and well-being. Successful goal striving unfolds between tenacious persistence on the one hand and timely disengagement on the other when a goal has become futile and too costly. Disengagement from goals is often difficult, however. Issues of unproductive persistence and (unsuccessful) goal disengagement have, for a long time, been addressed primarily in the realm of monetary decision-making (escalation of commitment). In the more recent past, research on personal goals has devoted attention to issues of goal disengagement, doing so from two different research perspectives (individual differences approach, process-oriented approach). This essay gives an overview of traditional and current research on goal disengagement with its practical implications for the individual but also on a societal level, and outlines promising lines of research addressing fundamental questions still unanswered.

"Winners never quit and quitters never win." In claiming this, the famous former US football coach Vince Lombardi addressed a widely shared social norm in Western industrialized countries: Keep on going, cling tenaciously to your goals, finish what you have started, and lead it to a successful conclusion! Indeed, parents, teachers, sport coaches, employers, and health professionals instruct their children, pupils, athletes, employees, or patients to persist in their goal striving even in the face of difficulties or setbacks. No doubt, without a considerable amount of tenacity, individuals would not even find their feet, would not develop any competencies, and ultimately would not reach the stars, as proclaimed in the Latin proverb: Per aspera ad astra (Through difficulties to the stars).

This is just one side of the coin, though, as there are many instances of "pathological persistence" (Ross & Staw, 1993), instances in which individuals overstretch themselves, throw good money after bad, become increasingly frustrated to the point of becoming depressed, and forgo more productive lines of action. Political, economic, and personal histories are full of examples of excessive persistence in endeavors that would better have been dismissed at an earlier point in time (e.g., Vietnam war, Long Island Lighting Company's Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant, remaining in an unhappy relationship or unsatisfactory job). Obviously, both getting started and keeping going, as well as stopping and letting go, are two fundamental prerequisites for successful goal striving—from the perspective of life-span development (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010) but also from the perspective of individuals' goal striving, quite independently of the context. Interestingly, though, unproductive persistence and (unsuccessful) goal disengagement have long been addressed primarily in the realm of monetary decision-making but not with respect to personal goal striving.

In the domain of *economic decision-making*, various theoretical accounts have been put forward which point to the deleterious dynamics in the "escalation of commitment", that is, the tendency to stick with a course of action despite suffering conspicuous (monetary) losses (Staw, 1997). More recently, research on *personal goals* has discovered the relevance of (hindered) goal disengagement for psychological and physical well-being (Brandstätter, Herrmann, & Schüler, 2013; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Heckhausen *et al.*, 2010). This line of research either focuses on the individual's goal adjustment capacities (i.e., distancing oneself from a futile goal, re-engaging in alternative goals; individual differences approach) (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003), or on the dynamic (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) processes in striving for a goal when goal disengagement becomes an issue (process-oriented approach) (Brandstätter & Herrmann, 2017).

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE FIELD

ESCALATION OF COMMITMENT IN ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

When an investment of resources (e.g., money and time) turns out to be futile, decision-makers often face the dilemma of whether to withdraw from the failing course of action or to continue investing in the endeavor. Abundant research in the field of *organizational decision-making* shows that there is a dogged tendency in decision-makers to "escalate their commitment", that is, to persist in the losing endeavor by committing more resources to

it—even in the face of questionable economic prospects (Staw, 1997). Several psychological explanations for escalating commitment have been proposed, the most influential of which are the self-justification hypothesis (Staw, 1997), the sunk cost effect (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), and prospect theory (Whyte, 1993).

Disengagement in Personal Goal Striving

Personal goals describe an individual's everyday strivings, from trivial pursuits to magnificent obsessions (Little, 1989), embedded in all kinds of different contexts (e.g., work, study, family, health). Goals "provide the structure that defines people's lives" (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1996, p. 12; Emmons, 1986) and thus regulate a wide array of human emotion, cognition, and behavior (Brunstein, 1993; Carver & Scheier, 2005). Due to the significance of personal goals for people's definitions of themselves, the persistent and successful pursuit of self-relevant goals plays a crucial role for well-being (for a summary, Hennecke & Brandstätter, 2017).

Even though a great variety of psychological (i.e., cognitive, affective) mechanisms support persistence in goal striving (Brandstätter & Hennecke, in press; Hennecke & Brandstätter, 2017), success is not guaranteed—who does not have a tale to tell about repeated failure and setbacks in striving for a personal goal, which eventually gave way to doubts about whether to hold on to or let go of the goal? Klinger (1977) was one of the first scholars to take a look at commitment to and disengagement from personal goals. He pointed out that disengaging from a goal can be a lengthy process and an incisive experience for the individual and one that is accompanied by profound emotional, cognitive and behavioral changes—a kind of "psychic earthquake" (Klinger, 1977, p. 137). Two core questions are addressed with respect to disengagement from personal goals: Do people differ in terms of their goal adjustment capacities when they are confronted with goals that are too costly or unrealistic to attain (Wrosch *et al.*, 2003)? What are the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes in the phase, dubbed an *action crisis*, that might precede goal disengagement (Brandstätter & Herrmann, 2017)?

ESCALATION OF COMMITMENT IN ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

The Self-Justification Hypothesis

The dominant theoretical account of "escalation of commitment" is the self-justification hypothesis derived from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). In the very first study testing this hypothesis, Staw (1997) argued that decision-makers, when incurring negative consequences within

an investment context, might enlarge their commitment of resources because they are eager to justify their initial investments. Refraining from further investments would mean admitting that one's initial investment decision was flawed. This, in turn, would create the unpleasant state of cognitive dissonance, as one's positive self-concept of being a competent and rational decision-maker would be heavily compromised. Studies testing the self-justification hypothesis in escalation of commitment follow a common pattern (Brockner, 1992). The decision-maker (mostly confronted with fictitious though realistic and personally involving case studies of economic investment decisions) is either personally responsible or not responsible for an initial financial decision, such as allocating R & D funds to one of two divisions of a company, which then either fails or succeeds. Escalation of commitment is operationalized as the amount of funds allocated to the initially chosen division in a second round of funding. A pervasive tendency is consistently observed in decision-makers to allocate more resources to the underperforming division when one is personally responsible for first but now failing investment (Schultze, Pfeiffer, & Schulz-Hardt, 2012; Staw, 1997; Wong, Yik, & Kwong, 2006). Beyond self-justification, several authors have claimed that impression management motives (e.g., saving face), that is, social justification, also play a role in the escalation of commitment (Staw, 1997).

THE SUNK COST EFFECT

A second influential theoretical approach to escalation of commitment refers to the *sunk cost effect*. The sunk cost effect is manifested "in a greater tendency to continue an endeavor once an investment in money, effort, or time has been made" (Arkes & Blumer, 1985, p. 124). Well-known is the scenario described by Arkes and Blumer (1985, p. 126), depicting that you have purchased a ticket for a skip trip to Michigan ($100) and weeks later one for a nother, even much more enjoyable skip trip to Wisconsin ($50) not realizing that they were for the same dates. With no options of returning or selling one of the tickets, which trip would you go on? Only 46% of the participants in the scenario study (and not 100% as predicted by traditional economic theory) chose the Wisconsin trip. From the perspective of rational economic decision theory, this qualifies as irrational behavior because only incremental costs should influence the decision, not sunk costs. The reluctance to withdraw from a prior investment of resources is psychologically justified by "the desire not to appear wasteful" (Arkes & Blumer, 1985, p. 125) and the attempt to "recover the initial investment" (Feldman & Wong, 2018, p. 1). Notably, the focus on financial investments in sunk cost research should not obscure the fact that nonmonetary costs (e.g., time, effort) may also mislead a decision-maker

into holding on to an endeavor whose outlook is bleak. Obviously, looking back and focusing on previous investments instead of looking ahead at the prospects of one's endeavor bears the risk of escalating commitment.

Prospect Theory

Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory is another theoretical approach put forward in the literature on escalation of commitment (Whyte, 1993). Prospect theory deals with decisions involving uncertainty and defines the conditions under which decision-makers are risk seeking versus risk averse. A core assumption of prospect theory is that decision-makers are risk seeking in the realm of losses whereas they are risk averse in the realm of gains. These propositions are derived from the theoretically postulated *value function*, on the one hand, and the *certainty effect*, on the other hand. The value function describes the relationship between (monetary) gains or losses and the subjective evaluation of these gains or losses. In the area of gains, it is concave, that is, higher gains are associated with a diminishing marginal utility. In the area of losses, the value function is convex indicating that higher losses are associated with "diminishing marginal harm". The certainty effect refers to the fact that certain gains are overvalued (i.e., subjectively evaluated relatively more positively than a gain with a probability of little less than certainty [$p < 1.0$]), whereas certain losses are undervalued (i.e., subjectively evaluated relatively more negatively than a loss with a probability of little less than certainty [$p < 1.0$]). Translated to the escalation of commitment, one would predict that individuals involved in a costly endeavor in which they have already invested heavily find themselves in the realm of losses. They are confronted with the decision either to give up the endeavor, which would mean the certain loss of all previous investments, or to choose the risky option, that is to go on. The latter is associated with the finite chance of changing course but also with the possibility of incurring even greater losses. The prevailing risk proneness in the realm of losses actually induces the decision-maker to choose the risky option, that is, to hold on to the chosen (costly) line of behavior (Whyte, 1993).

Besides these traditional influential theories explaining escalation of commitment, more recent research has focused on *cognitive (information) processing* (Schultze et al., 2012; framing, Feldman & Wong, 2018), and affective processes (Wong *et al.*, 2006; Zhang & Baumeister, 2006) in the escalation of commitment. For example, Schultze *et al.* (2012) showed that the tendency to commit further resources to losing courses of action is mediated by a biased evaluation of information about the success versus failure of the chosen course of action. In more concrete terms, participants who had made a first (unprofitable) investment decision valued information

in favor of further investments more positively than participants who were not responsible for the first investment. With respect to the importance of emotional aspects in escalating situations (e.g., trait or state negative affect, threatened self-esteem), Zhang and Baumeister (2006) reported that participants who had been experimentally confronted (vs not confronted) with an ego threat were more prone to escalate their commitment in a fruitless endeavor. In sum, escalation of commitment research stresses the conflict a decision-maker faces between the calamities associated with pursuing a goal further (i.e., investing more and more resources against long odds) and the negative consequences of letting it go (i.e., admitting to having made a flawed initial decision, appearing wasteful). It is also evident that cognitive as well as affective processes are involved in escalation of commitment; however, these have not been investigated systematically so far.

DISENGAGEMENT IN PERSONAL GOAL STRIVING

An Individual Differences Perspective on Goal Disengagement

Two theoretical approaches explicitly address issues of goal disengagement from the perspective of individual differences; on the one hand, the *dual-process model of assimilative and accommodative coping* (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002) and, on the other hand, the concept of *individual goal adjustment tendencies* (Wrosch, *et al.*, 2003).

The Dual-Process Model of Assimilative and Accommodative Coping This model by Brandtstädter and Rothermund (2002; Rothermund & Brandtstädter, 2003) focuses on individuals' reactions when confronted with setbacks or prospective losses in striving for a personal goal. It postulates that in such instances individuals will first intensify their efforts (assimilative mode of coping) through instrumental activities through which the individual tries to align the present situation with his or her goals and aspirations. However, when a goal emerges as being (subjectively) unattainable, accommodative coping sets in, which involves a devaluation of, or disengagement from, unattainable goals or a lowering of personal aspirations. The individual's inclination to chronically use assimilative and/or accommodative strategies can be measured using a 30-item questionnaire encompassing two orthogonal scales: *Tenacious Goal Pursuit* (e.g., "If I run into problems, I usually double my efforts." [assimilation]) and *Flexible Goal Adjustment* (e.g., "If I run into problems, I let go of my goal, instead of fighting too long for it." [accommodation]) (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Notably, successful goal striving has been posited to arise from the dynamic, situation-sensitive interplay of assimilative, and accommodative strategies. As assimilation

and accommodation ultimately buffer difficulties in goal striving, although in different ways, both are independently associated with well-being across all age levels (Rothermund & Brandtstädter, 2003).

Goal Disengagement and Goal Reengagement Capacities In a very similar vein, Wrosch and his colleagues (2003) conceived of goal adjustment capacities as core dimensions of personality but place the emphasis on an individual's reaction when confronted with a subjectively unattainable goal. The authors empirically demonstrate the importance of differentiating between (the largely independent) *goal disengagement* and *goal reengagement capacities* that can be measured using the 10-item *Goal Adjustment Scale* (Wrosch *et al.*, 2003). *Goal disengagement*, on the one hand, is defined as an individual's tendency to withdraw behavioral efforts and psychological commitment from unfeasible goals (e.g., "If I have to stop pursuing an important goal in my life [generic stem of all items], it is easy for me to reduce my efforts toward the goal."). *Goal reengagement*, on the other hand, is conceptualized as the capacity to identify, commit to and work on new goals (e.g., " … I convince myself that I have other meaningful goals to pursue.").

  The studies conducted by Wrosch and his colleagues (for a summary, Wrosch *et al.*, 2013), analogously to the above-mentioned research of Brandt-städter and colleagues, primarily focused on the relationship between adjusting to the experience of unattainable goals and (psychological and physical) well-being. In a nutshell, evidence from a multitude of cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies confirms that goal adjustment capacities predict a great variety of adaptive outcomes (e.g., lower levels of perceived stress, depressive symptoms, or intrusive thoughts; higher levels of well-being; lower biomarkers of chronic inflammation; fewer symptoms of illness), above and beyond other personality characteristics (e.g., Big Five personality factors, assimilation, accomodation). This was true for quite diverse samples and contexts (e.g., college students, community-dwelling adults, breast cancer survivors, adults taking care of a family member afflicted by a severe disease). Interestingly, goal reengagement tenden-cies show a distinct pattern of relationships with outcome variables (i.e., facilitating positive well-being instead of ameliorating negative aspects of well-being) which underscores the differential validity of these capacities. Wrosch *et al.* (2013) concluded that goal disengagement primarily aims at relieving psychological distress associated with repeated goal failure. In contrast, goal reengagement aims at keeping a person engaged in feasible and meaningful activities, which, in turn, strengthens the positive aspects of subjective well-being.

The discovery of individual differences in coping with unattainable goals has greatly advanced our understanding of goal disengagement. However, a more process-oriented analysis of the mechanisms is still lacking, explaining *how* individuals disengage from a goal when striving has become too costly or the expectations of success are too low.

A Process-Oriented Approach to Goal Disengagement: The Concept of an Action Crisis

Based on the notion put forward by Klinger (1977) that disengagement from a goal is by no means a binary event but rather the result of a lengthy and occasionally rather difficult process, an *action crisis* is conceived of as a critical phase in this process (Brandstätter & Herrmann, 2017; Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013). An action crisis is characterized by a motivational conflict in which the individual is torn between holding on to and letting go of a personal goal—a situation that typically arises when individuals have already invested a great deal into their goal, but suffer from repeated setbacks and/or a substantial drop in the perceived desirability of the goal.

The extent to which an action crisis is experienced in a personal goal has been operationalized by the *Action Crisis Scale* (*ACRISS*; Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013), which covers different aspects (i.e., conflict, setbacks, implemental disorientation, rumination, disengagement impulses and procrastination) assumed to be constitutive of the phenomenon in question. Although an action crisis does not have to result in the abandonment of the goal, but may likewise be overcome by a renewal of the commitment (e.g., if people identify new strategies for goal attainment), recent findings show that it frequently precedes goal termination (Herrmann & Brandstätter, 2015).

Empirical studies have examined the affective, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral correlates of an action crisis. In line with its interpretation as an intrapsychic conflict, it has been found to concurrently and longitudinally predict impairments in psychological (affect and life-satisfaction) and physical well-being (sleeping disorders, symptoms) in healthy individuals (Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, in a clinical sample of patients with musculoskeletal disorders, action crises in personal goals compromised recovery during physical therapy (Wolf, Herrmann, Zubler, & Brandstätter, 2018). Finally, in a field study with marathon runners, in which salivary cortisol was sampled after 10, 20, 30, and 40 km, an action crisis, measured 2 weeks before the race, was predictive of a stronger cortisol secretion (i.e., slope) during the race (Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013).

An action crisis also affects the individual's goal-related cognitive orientation (*mindset*) (Herrmann, Baur, Brandstätter, Hänggi, & Jäncke, 2014). Hypotheses relating to the cognitive correlates of an action crisis are based

on the mindset theory of action phases (Gollwitzer & Keller, 2016). Mindset theory distinguishes distinct phases in goal pursuit, each associated with a specific challenge (i.e., choosing between the multitude of one's wishes in order to set attractive and realistic goals; implementing the chosen goal). Each phase is thought to be accompanied by a specific mindset (e.g., deliberative vs implemental mindset) that supports tackling the task in an optimal way. The *implemental* mindset, which focuses on implemental issues (i.e., when, where, how to act) and an overly optimistic outlook in favor of the goal, contributes to persistence and goal attainment. In an action crisis, however, this firm orientation toward goal implementation is dampened, while a *deliberative* weighing of the pros and cons of the goal and a sober assessment of the desirability and feasibility of the goal resurge. This change in cognitive orientation, which has been denoted a mindset-shift (Herrmann *et al.*, 2014), is regarded as facilitating the initiation of the disengagement process (Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013). Importantly, empirical evidence so far reinforces the view that disengagement is shaped by reciprocal processes between the experience of an action crisis and changes in the cognitive appraisal of the goal. An action crisis in the goal to complete a university degree predicted a devaluation of its desirability and attainability, and conversely, low goal attainability (but not desirability) predicted increases in action crises (Ghassemi, Bernecker, Herrmann, & Brandstätter, 2017).

  The affective impairment resulting from the intrapsychic conflict and the ambiguous cognitive orientation between weighing up and acting ("being in two minds") presumably has a negative impact on performance. Students who were not sure whether to continue their major and who were considering dropping out, for example, performed significantly worse over the course of several terms than students who did not entertain similar thoughts (Herrmann & Brandstätter, 2015). Analogously, individuals who experienced higher levels of action crisis while preparing for a marathon performed worse in the marathon 2 weeks later, controlling for experience, amount of training, age, and body mass index. This effect was partly mediated by steeper increases in salivary cortisol, a physiological indicator of stress, measured repeatedly during the run (Brandstätter *et al.*, 2013). Altogether, an action crisis can last for weeks and months, profoundly compromising well-being and performance, an issue that calls for interventions to overcome this wearisome phase of goal pursuit.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This essay set out to show that persistence in pursuing one's goals and projects as well as disengagement from them are two pivotal aspects of successful goal striving—be it in the economic context or in the realm of

personal goals. On the one hand, individuals would never achieve what they value without the capacity to tenaciously sustain their efforts, even in the face of high costs or obstacles. On the other hand, disengagement from a goal may become badly necessary when striving for the goal turns out to be unrealistic or too costly. This is easier said than done, though. In everyday life, individuals are rarely confronted with completely unattainable goals. On the contrary, the difficulties from which people typically suffer in their everyday goal striving are more innocuous; and project-related costs seldom accrue all at once, but occur in the guise of the "slippery slope", increasing steadily but almost imperceptibly. Hence, in the vast majority of situations it is anything but clear whether the goal or project should be abandoned or not; what follows is a full-blown decision conflict (Mann & Janis, 1982) between hanging on or letting go. Usually, despite repeated setbacks, there remains a glimmer of hope that, with increased effort, one will be able to realign one's goal striving or that changing environmental circumstances might support one's goal striving again in the future. Although, this state of affairs is quite well known, and past research that analyzed the determinants and consequences of "pathological persistence" (Ross & Staw, 1993) has accumulated, fundamental questions still remain unanswered that need to be addressed in future research, two of which will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

ESCALATION OF COMMITMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT FROM GOALS CONSTRUED AS A DECISION CONFLICT

One productive avenue for future research seems to be scrutinizing the decisional conflict present in the escalation of commitment or in situations when doubts arise as to whether to hold on to a personal goal. Traditionally, escalation of commitment has been viewed from the perspective of economic decision making, however, with too narrow a perspective. It is not only the expected (or already incurred) costs and benefits that determine further persistence, but all kinds of self-regulatory processes addressed in self-regulation research. In this regard, Gollwitzer and Keller (2016) revealed that a core postulate of mindset theory of action phases is that desirability and feasibility of a goal only play a role when people deliberate on whether or not to commit to the goal in question, but not anymore after having made a decision in favor of the goal. For example, it would be intriguing to analyze how individuals trapped in the futile pursuit of a goal construe their concrete decision alternatives and how this relates to outcome variables. Moreover, an analysis of the dynamic interplay between affective and cognitive processes over the course of time would guarantee important

insights into mediating mechanisms of an ongoing decision conflict resulting in unproductive persistence.

Interventions to Prevent or Overcome Unproductive Persistence

Holding on too long to futile goals can be detrimental in various regards—on the level of individuals' well-being and health, but also on the level of economic and societal outcomes. Hence, it is all the more astonishing that there has been virtually no research on interventions to prevent or overcome unproductive persistence (for an exception, Henderson, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2007; Simonson & Staw, 1992). It seems worthwhile identifying the various points in the course of goal pursuit (e.g., decision on a project/goal; the first occurrence of a disengagement impulse) at which intervening would be most helpful. This could be a certain mental training before making a decision for a project/goal that would be informed by research on the self-regulation of goals (for a summary, Brandstätter & Hennecke, in press). This could also be an intervention aimed at strengthening affect regulation competencies when confronted with setbacks that compromise self-esteem.

Taken together, persistence and disengagement in goal striving is an intriguing field of theoretical research with enormous practical implications for all areas of an individual's life and for society in general. Sticking to the goal of revealing its determinants, mechanisms, and consequences does not, therefore, seem to be an escalation of commitment.

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