

Journal of Management - Decision on Manuscript ID JOM-18-1052

Journal of Management <onbehalf@manuscriptcentral.com>

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Inbox

To: Dishop, Christopher <dishopch@msu.edu>;

18-Dec-2018

Dear Christopher Dishop,

Thank you for submitting your paper entitled "Goal Sampling Theory" (Manuscript ID JOM-18-1052) to the Journal of Management for publication consideration. It is clear that a great deal of effort went into this paper and we appreciate you entrusting your work with us. As you may know, the mission of the journal is to publish empirical, theoretical, and review articles on management topics. Manuscripts that are suitable for publication in the Journal of Management cover such areas as business strategy and policy, entrepreneurship, human resource management, organizational behavior, organizational theory, and research methods. Your paper clearly aligns with JOM's mission and scope.

In terms of the process, once we received your manuscript, we sent it to management scholars who are experts in this area of research. They have now completed their reviews of your paper. In addition, I read the paper and the reviews. My intention is not to act as an additional reviewer but to make a decision that integrates the reviewers' feedback with JOM's standards and norms.

Based on the review information, I am sorry to inform you that JOM is not able to publish this work in its current form. Furthermore, we are not able to invite you to revise and resubmit this paper or to submit any variant of this work as new paper to JOM at a future time. To be clear, this decision was not because of a lack of interest in your work. In fact, you will see that the reviewers provided extensive feedback on your paper, which directly relates to their investment in your ideas. While their interest in your work was shared, you will notice that the reviewers were somewhat divided in their overall assessment about the potential significance of its contribution. Reviewer 1 sees some potential in the ideas you offered, but Reviewer 2 questions what is learned from this exercise. Unfortunately, my own reading was more in line with Reviewer 2's reading. I will not repeat the feedback the reviewers offered but I do want to highlight the concerns I had with what you offered, in particular to the extent to which my concerns overlapped with those of the reviewers. My hope is that taking all the feedback into account will help you as you consider ways of revising your paper so that you can find it a home.

The most significant concern was one that was raised by both reviewers but that was a significant one for Reviewer 2 (see first paragraph under General Comments and also this reviewer's comments on pages 11, 12, 15, and 16) regarding the significance and insightfulness of what you ultimately offer. A couple of additional

examples from my own reading might be useful here:

Take, for example, Proposition 3. I'm not sure how insightful this is. People are likely to do again what was a positive experience and less likely to do again what was a negative experience. Certainly, there's theory and data that that supports this idea. Social learning theory, as an example, would suggest that efficacy beliefs might explain the effects you predicted, although I did find the idea that goal completion was irrelevant both provocative and, in some ways, inconsistent with much prior literature. Related, I suspect completion is linked to satisfaction.

As another example, Proposition 5 isn't particularly useful either, as we know that accuracy is a function of reliability and I'd anticipate greater reliability with more data points. Coupled with the concerns Reviewer 2 raised, I'm not sure what is here that is truly novel or can move the literature forward in a significant way.

Like Reviewer 2 (see their comment regarding pages 6 and 10), I worry that some of your arguments are a bit superficial regarding the role of the environment, which is a major feature of your theory. For example, while we might disagree about how often, or to what extent organizational scholars recognize and model the role of the environment, your theory doesn't do much more than remind scholars that the environment should be considered. The same can be said about time.

I must admit that I struggled with your paper, in large part, because it was not entirely clear that goals were the focus as opposed to tasks or behaviors. Put another way, is it truly goals that are being sampled or tasks or experiences? The example you provide at the bottom of page 24 may make the point here. In this example, the goal really is not being sampled. The goal stays the same. What varies is the employee's attempts at the goal. Thus, conversing (a task) is what is repeatedly sampled as the employee builds experience. This potential lack of precision in your labelling and discussion of your phenomenon of interest undermined your efforts to present a novel theory about goal choice.

Despite the challenges I had with your paper, I applaud your efforts. I thought your paper was well-written and ambitious (note that some of the issues raised by Reviewer 2 about your writing style are indeed stylistic). If the issues raised above are reconciled, I suspect you can find a great home for your work, but I do not believe that this paper is the sort of paper that will appeal to JOM readers, especially if its novel theoretical and practical implications are not clearer.

In sum, I wish I could provide more positive news. Still, I hope that our comments will help in the development of your work, as it is our intention at JOM that the review process be constructive and developmental for all authors regardless of the outcome. Thank you for the opportunity to review your work and for considering the Journal of Management as a potential publication outlet. We hope that despite the outcome on this particular paper, you will continue to do so in the future. I personally enjoyed reading about the work you have done in this area and I wish you the best of luck in your continued research endeavors.

Sincerely,

Christopher O. L. H. Porter
Action Editor, Journal of Management

Reviewer Comments:

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author

This theoretical paper draws on the concept of experience sampling to formulate functions that predict the likelihood of choosing a goal based on utility, prior experiences, and the environment. The paper explains goal sampling in relation to the actor's memory of past actions that led to goal completion or partial completion. The model emphasizes the critical role of the environment on goal selection—a variable, the paper argues, that deserves more than the limited attention it has received in organizational research. As such, the aim is to produce a rich “control structure” that explains goal sampling. The theory builds on Denrell (2005) model of impression sampling and Steel and König's (2006) temporal motivation theory (cited in the manuscript) to explain “how and why goal choices update over time”—what the paper calls “goal sampling” (p. 4). The overall model integrates complex concepts—hyperbolic discounting, expectancy theory, prospect theory, and need theory—to predict goal choice. Examples throughout simplify the explanation and clarify the mathematical formulations.

Overall, the paper adds value and provides direction for research by focusing attention on the daily decisions people make as they prioritize, deal with unplanned events, take advantage of opportunities, and address imposed requirements, some of which have deadlines. Taking into account environmental conditions (support and limitations) becomes an important element to individual goal choice. The paper offers examples from research that show how people (and animals) are affected by the environment, for instance, the creation of comfortable surroundings. The paper also cites studies that show how framing reward contingencies and outcomes affect choice of activities. The notion that negative utility estimates (e.g., the perceived likelihood of failing) are more stable than positive estimates which lead to more goal samplings that are therefore likely to change (Proposition 6) and the notion that there are greater amounts of false negative utility estimates than false positives where people are free to sample goals (Proposition 7) are intriguing and suggests how people may get mired in not taking risks.

This is a complex paper. However, it is well-written and the author has taken pains to provide clarity through propositions, examples, and expressions of the essence of the ideas at all stages of the paper. The paper could do more to outline research questions that stem from the goal sampling theory. Also, the paper could outline more direct implications for practice, for instance, how a leader positions goals (describes importance and value) and how interventions can offer heuristics to help individuals recognize and address the multitude of behavioral options they have on any given day or at any given hour for that matter. Also, the paper could recognize that a given behavioral alternative, really a task—the goal being to complete the task—may be a sub-goal toward a larger and longer-term objective. This suggests how GST relates to prioritizing task choices, maintaining a goal but procrastinating in addressing elements needed for goal completion, handling

distractions, and multi-tasking. In other words, GST may inform how individuals handle the stress of life, and how organizations impose multiple goals while expecting and evaluating accomplishment of larger objectives.

By the way, Denrell (2005) was cited but (2007) was missing: Denrell, J. (2007). Adaptive learning and risk taking. *Psychological Review*, 114 (1), 177-187.

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author

General comments

This paper provides a coherent discussion of how one might model goal pursuit using mathematical formulas. Unfortunately, it does not provide a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the relationships between goals and behavior beyond things we have known for decades (e.g., that past rewards influence future actions, or that behavior tends to stay constant over time). Nor does it significantly build upon the vast literature looking at goals, self-regulation and changes in behavior over time (Kanfer & Kanfer, 1991, Fitzimons & Finkel, 2018). And it fails to include any data to test the utility and accuracy of the model.

The main value of this work, in my opinion, is provide a simple illustration of basic concepts showing how mathematical formulas can be used to model human behavior (Hunt, 2006). As such, it might add value for an audience unfamiliar with psychology as a science. But this does not describe the readership of the *Journal of Management*.

I have provided additional comments that might be used to improve this paper, although correcting these comments will not address the core limitation of the paper as whole.

One last note about writing style. The author makes extensive use of the first person with phrases such as "I discuss", "I show" or "I demonstrate". This egocentric style of writing can quickly grow tiresome for readers such as myself. Since the author is writing the paper, the reader does not need to be told that the ideas in the paper are those of the author. We will assume that is the case, unless the author cites another source as the basis of an idea or concept.

References

Hunt, E. (2006). Preface. In *The Mathematics of Behavior* (pp. ix-X). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Kanfer, R., & Kanfer, F. H. (1991). Goals and self-regulation: Applications of theory to work settings. In M. L. Maehr & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in Motivation and Achievement* (Vol. 7, pp. 287-326). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
 Fitzsimons, G. M., & Finkel, E. J. (2018). Transactive-goal-dynamics theory: A discipline-wide perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(5), 332-338.

Specific comments

Page 1, line 9: emails, meetings and phone calls are not superficial for most jobs.

Page 1, line 13: The paper should define "goal sampling" the first time it used.

Page 1, line 31: what is meant by "necessary function parameters"?

Page 1, line 50: the implication that employees choose goals "made available by the environment" seems to ignore the ability to have self-created goals and internally driven action; work is not just about reacting to things; the best employees tend to be ones that create change, not ones who just respond to it

Page 2, line 3: The reference to Newell and Meehl is unnecessary. This is a paper about goal setting and self-regulation, not theory development.

Page 2, line 25: This may be how you are defining "Dynamics", but it is not how it is often defined. Something can be dynamic without having memory of the past.

Page 3, line 15: Some of the language in the paper could be simplified for clarification. This is a good example. Instead of "The current paper will help future work think clearly about how various findings are related and, when abstracted and combined, provide rich explanatory power" why not say something like "The theory developed in this paper integrates and explains relationships between previous independent research findings associated with goal setting."

Page 3, line 19: It is not clear what is meant by "GST makes strong null predictions". Does the theory predict that we won't find effects? Are you going to predict that something won't happen? That seems like an odd way to prove a theory given all the reasons why we might expect the status quo to stay constant over time regardless of any specific theory.

Page 4, lines 3 to 20: Instead of saying what you are going to tell us, please just tell us.

Page 4, line 27: What about people pursuing multiple goals at once? Is this a theory of goal pursuit, or a theory of how people focus attention? The example at the beginning of the paper suggests that you aren't studying what goals to pursue, but what activities to focus on at a given point in time. A person can still pursue a goal even if they are temporarily distracted.

Page 4, line 51: This formula is so general that it is useless.

Page 5, line 3: If these variables are not the focus of the paper, then do not discuss them.

Page 5, line 15: What does "greater than one would assume" imply? Are you presuming to know what the reader does and does not assume about goal choice consistency?

Page 6, line 48 through Page 8 line 24: There is no need to provide all these examples showing how environment influences behavior. This is not something readers need to be convinced is true. And the examples provided are illustrative but not specifically relevant to the topic. This entire section is unnecessary.

Page 10, line 16: We may not be able to capture the entire environment, but we can capture aspects of it. Which is what I was hoping this theory was going to discuss. Specifically, what unique features or characteristics in the environment lead someone to pursue one goal vs another? By failing to address this level of detail, this paper is just describing a theory that posits that "the environment influences goal behavior" which is a bit like saying "motivation influences action". A theory like this is so obvious and general that it is useless in terms of advancing our understanding of employee behavior.

Page 11, line 30: This is basically saying "things change over time". This is not a particularly insightful or useful observation.

Page 12, line 14: This formula is basically saying "the past influences the future" – again this is not a very useful or insightful observation.

Page 15: This entire section is basically just saying that future behavior is influenced by rewards and punishment received for past behaviors. We already have a theory for this called "behaviorism".

Page 16 to 26. This section builds out formulas and propositions that might be summarized as "the goals people focus on in the future depend on a) the value they place on different goals, b) the degree to which the environment limits or enables them to pursue different goals, and c) the rewards they have received for pursuing different types of goal". This is so generic that it is neither interesting, enlightening, nor useful. To make it interesting additional theoretical work would be needed to guide specific propositions related to interactions between different types of goals, categories of environmental distractors, or the nature of different forms reward or punishment.