RUNNING HEAD: Goal-generic value

On the Experience of Goals:

Differentiating Goal-Generic Value from Goal-Specific Value

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Abstract

We distinguish between *goal-specific value*, which refers to the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits associated with a particular goal ("value derived from *the* goal"), and *goal-generic value*, which refers to the benefits associated with having, pursuing, or completing a goal in general ("value derived from *a* goal"). Motivation theory and research have traditionally, if tacitly, sought to explain decision-making (e.g., What to prioritize? How much to invest?) based on goal-specific value. But several goal-related decision regularities are not easily explained by accounting for goal-specific value alone, such as online workers choosing a lower-paying assignment (over a higher-paying assignment) if it allows them to complete the last step in a sequence and college students electing to do more work sooner (rather than less work later) if it provides them closure. Accounting for goal-generic value – such as the positive experiences of purpose, progress, closure, and accomplishment – offers additional insight into people's decisions. More generally, auditing goals in a way that accounts for both goal-specific value and goal-generic value is crucial for understanding goal pursuits.

Keywords: goals, value, completion, progress, motivation, perseverance, effectance

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is canonical within the behavioral sciences to say that people pursue goals that provide value. Social-psychological analyses of the sources of that value typically focus on value provided by the activity itself, or *intrinsic value*, and value contingent on the completion of the activity, or *extrinsic value*. For example, a school project is more valuable to the extent that it is interesting (rather than boring) or worth more points (rather than fewer); a work assignment is more valuable to the extent that it offers novel challenges (rather than tedium) or pays more (rather than less); a family outing is more valuable to the extent that it is pleasant (rather than painful) or creates good memories (rather than bad ones). It would be a mistake, however, to presume that the total value of a goal is fully accounted for by attraction to (or repulsion from) the means relevant to the specific pursuit and the contingencies afforded by it. Students may also value a project because it offers an opportunity to experience progress. Workers may also value an assignment because it offers a chance to cross something off their to-do list. Families may also value activities because they enjoy having shared goals. Indeed, a growing number of empirical results suggest that people find value in goal-related experiences that are not determined by the content of the goal.

To account for the sources of goal-related value that are determined by the content of the goal as well as those that are not, we propose a framework that differentiates between *goal-specific value* and *goal-generic value* (Figure 1). Goal-specific value derives from *the* goal. It refers to the intrinsic or extrinsic benefits inherent to that pursuit. If the activity is pleasurable (e.g., an interesting puzzle) or if its successful completion promises

contingent rewards (e.g., more points toward a grade), then it is of high value. These value sources drive intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, respectively. In contrast, goal-generic value is derived from having, pursuing, or completing *a* goal in general. It refers to the benefits derived from the subjective experience of having versus not having goals (e.g., purpose, enrichment), progressing versus not progressing on goals (e.g., locomotion, agency), and completing versus not completing goals (e.g., gaining closure, feeling accomplished), separate from the content of the activity or endstate. The framework is specific to goal-setting, goal-striving, and goal-accomplishment—that is, to the experience of *goals*.

Our aim is to broaden consideration of the ways in which goals can shape human behavior. It is not only about the contingencies they offer or the specific activities they require. It is also about rewarding aspects of the experience of having goals, progressing on them, and accomplishing them. Accounting for goal-generic value helps to explain a variety of otherwise difficult-to-explain decisions, especially scenarios in which people deliberately forgo goal-specific intrinsic or extrinsic benefits in choosing activities.

Recent studies have provided evidence of goal-generic value by focusing on goal completion. Because these studies provide the clearest support for the goal-generic value construct, we describe them first. We highlight five studies that identify situations in which people will deliberately sacrifice intrinsic or extrinsic goal-specific value for the opportunity to experience goal completion (Converse et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2023; Ruan et al., 2023). We then turn to several lines of research that suggest people may also find goal-generic value from the experience of having goals and the experience of

progressing on goals. Finally, we ask where goal-generic value comes from. We suggest it reflects a fundamental motive to be effective in the world.

2 | THE GENERIC VALUE OF COMPLETING GOALS

The acceptance of a task (e.g., some project) for whatever reason (e.g., economic gain) creates an independent motive to complete the task. (Garland & Conlon, 1998, p. 2027).

The idea of a generic desire to "finish what one has started" can be traced to Lewin's *task tension* construct, which holds that finishing a goal relieves motivational tension (1926; see Lewin, 1999; Garland & Conlon, 1998; Zeigarnik, 1927). It frees individuals from the cognitive burdens of active monitoring (Förster et al., 2005) and the negative feeling that they are not living up to their own standards (Higgins, 1987). Depending on one's regulatory tendencies, goal completion turns dejection and disappointment into happiness and satisfaction, or tension and unease into relaxation and calm, a good trade in either case (Higgins et al., 1997). Goal completion also bolsters an individual's feelings of competence, efficacy, and interest (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). To explain persistence beyond what seems warranted by available rewards, some theorists have posited that individuals often initiate tasks because of the contingent benefits but then experience a motive shift such that "completion" becomes a goal in itself (Boehne & Paese, 2000; Conlon & Garland, 1993; Halkjelsvik & Rise, 2015). Goal completion, it seems, may be rewarding in its own right.

Though not designed with goal-generic value in mind, multiple studies have identified decision regularities that seem to reflect the pursuit of completion for its own sake. For instance, the same activities are more motivating when presented in a way that encourages people to perceive them as a coherent, completable set rather than a list of

independent tasks (Barasz et al., 2017). "Completability" also seems to influence borrowers' decisions about which debts to pay first. Although paying down larger, more expensive accounts first is normative, borrowers often close out smaller, less expensive accounts first (Amar et al., 2011). Field studies hint that workers might also be drawn to completable tasks, sometimes to the detriment of their organizations. In the medical profession, emergency-room physicians sometimes decrease their hospitals' productivity by prioritizing easier-to-complete cases (Kc et al., 2020), and radiologists sometimes override organizational prescriptions about case ordering by moving shorter cases earlier in the queue (Ibanez et al., 2018). Yet, while each of these behavioral outcomes could be partly caused by participants' expectations of experiencing value from completion, the studies that documented them were not designed to isolate that potential factor.

A more direct case for goal-generic value would require that people trade goal-specific value for goal-generic value. This tradeoff could be operationalized through choice, such as selecting a task with lower goal-specific value if it is expected to provide higher goal-generic value, or through payment, such as investing more money or effort in an activity expected to provide goal-generic value. We describe five illustrative studies that employed some version of this approach.

2.1 | Choosing Goal-Generic Value: Trading Pay for a Completion Experience

In a series of studies, researchers investigated whether online workers would deliberately sacrifice goal-specific value for goal-generic value (Converse et al., 2023). In one study, they tested whether participants would be more likely to choose a lower-paying

job over a higher-paying job when the lower-paying job was (versus was not) presented as the last step in an arbitrary sequence (Study 1).

To set up the critical comparison, researchers first oriented participants to a multi-round job-selection paradigm. Each job contributed one segment to a larger six-segment "Task." Jobs associated with different Tasks paid different amounts of money. The jobs were presented to participants on virtual cards. Each card displayed an uninformative Task number at the top (e.g., "Task 301", "Task 463"). Below that, the card showed a six-segment pie chart. The pie charts depicted different levels of inherited completeness (e.g., "4/6 complete", "2/6 complete") and the payment amount per segment (e.g., "$0.15 each segment", "$0.19 each segment"). The pie charts that participants saw never started at "0/6 complete," implying that multiple workers must be doing separate jobs that contributed segments to the same Task. And, across rounds, participants moved between different cards (identified by new Task numbers), further emphasizing that a single participant was not necessarily responsible for the whole of a single Task.

When participants clicked on a card, the program took them to the job. The jobs were all photographic CAPTCHAs: Participants selected the squares on a gridded image that matched the prompt. For example, one version of the CAPTCHA showed a 4×4 grid of a street scene and prompted participants to click all squares that showed a traffic light. (Different Task numbers revealed different CAPTCHA scenes.) After submitting the job, participants advanced to a summary screen. It showed an animation of the relevant segment filling in and informed them that the applicable bonus had been deposited into their account. The program then appeared to re-load, starting a new round, and displaying one or more new cards.

In the first two rounds, the program only presented one card at the job-selection phase. Participants did not have a choice between different jobs. They selected the card and advanced through the round. In the third round, the program presented two different cards to participants but instructed them on which card to select. These three rounds were included to familiarize participants with various features of the task.

The two critical choices appeared (in counterbalanced order) in the fourth and fifth rounds. In these rounds, the program presented participants with two different cards and allowed them to choose between the jobs. Aside from having different arbitrary Task numbers, the cards differed in their inherited completion levels and payment amounts. In the "control round," Job A paid $0.13 while Job B paid $0.19. Both jobs would contribute the third segment to the 6-segment Task. With nothing except the contingent reward differing between jobs, only 9% of participants chose the lower-paying Job A (see Figure 2). In the "conflict round," researchers added goal-generic value to the equation by prompting participants to choose between the extrinsic reward of higher payment and the goal-generic opportunity to complete an arbitrary sequence. Here, Job B still paid 6 cents more than Job A', but Job A' now appeared as the last segment in the 6-segment sequence, thus offering the subjective experience of completion. Under these conditions, 24% of participants chose the lower-paying but Task-completing Job A'.

If one accounted for only the goal-specific intrinsic and extrinsic value of Job B versus Job A', there was no reason to choose Job A': It had the same intrinsic value as its counterpart choice and it offered less extrinsic value. But, when one accounts for the goal-generic value of expecting to feel good about completing something, then it makes sense

that some participants – specifically those who valued completing the sequence more than they valued the small difference in payment – would choose it.

2.2 | Choosing Goal-Generic Value: Trading Fun for a Completion Experience

In a variation of the same paradigm (Converse et al., 2023, Study 2), researchers held extrinsic value constant across options and pitted the goal-generic value of completing an arbitrary sequence against goal-specific intrinsic value. In a "control round" in this experiment, Job A was a tedious typing job while Job B was a more enjoyable picture-labeling job that showed cute baby animals. Both jobs would contribute the fourth segment of a 6-segment Task. Only 20% of participants chose the more tedious work of Job A in this setting (see Figure 3). But in a "conflict round," when the tedious work of Job A' was represented as contributing the sixth and final segment of the 6-segment Task, where as the more enjoyable baby-animal work of Job B was still only the fourth segment out of six, 38% of workers chose the tedious Job A'. Here again, it appears that the goal-generic value of finishing something outweighed the goal-specific intrinsic value for a significant number of participants.

Without accounting for the goal-generic benefits of completing the last step in an apparent sequence, the pattern of choices in the respective conflict conditions seems to imply a value-destroying proposition. In Study 1, some workers accepted lower pay to complete the same tedious job; and in Study 2, some workers accepted a more tedious job for the same amount of pay. Yet, those workers also gained the opportunity to complete something. For those participants, the gain in goal-generic value presumably offset the loss in goal-specific value.

2.3 | Working for Goal-Generic Value: Offering More Work for Earlier Closure

Another line of studies investigated goal-generic value by examining people's pursuit of closure (Roberts et al., 2023). These studies found that the opportunity to experience closure leads people to incur more burden sooner rather than less burden later, effectively showing impatience to pay. For example, in one study (Study 2), participants chose between two real workloads, with different timing considerations based on one of three choice regimes (see Figure 4). In all three regimes, participants learned that they would receive a $1 bonus, to be paid one month in the future, if they completed their chosen bonus study within 24 hours of its availability. In a "both-soon" condition, participants learned that the bonus studies would be available *tomorrow* and they could choose between a version requiring them to complete 17 tasks and a version requiring them to complete 20 tasks. With both options offering the same opportunity to achieve closure tomorrow, and one blatantly requiring more work, only 21% of participants chose to do more work. In a "both-later" condition, participants learned that the bonus studies would be available *in one month* and that they could similarly choose between a version with 17 tasks and a version with 20 tasks. With both options now delaying closure for a month, and one blatantly requiring more work, only 18% of participants chose to do more work. Finally, in a critical tradeoff condition, participants learned that they could choose between a bonus study requiring them to complete 17 tasks one month later and a bonus study requiring them to complete 20 tasks tomorrow. Here, the first choice offered less work but later closure, whereas the second choice offered more work but earlier closure. Under these conditions, 65% of participants chose to do more work. This pattern of choices

suggests that many participants positively valued the prospect of earlier closure – enough to compensate for the extra work.

In a follow-up, researchers investigated whether task framing could affect participants' assessments of goal-generic value (Roberts et al., 2023, Study 4). Consistent with the hypothesis that people find value in closing out projects they have already started, researchers predicted that participants would display more impatience to finish the last step of an already-active project than to start and finish equivalent work described as a separate task. To test this, participants first wrote three consumer-product reviews. Next, they made a choice concerning a fourth review. Specifically, participants chose whether they wanted the fourth review to be a 10-question review administered the next day or a 5-question review administered in two weeks. They would receive the same payment after two weeks regardless of their choice. Critically, the fourth review was framed as either 'the last task in the sequence' or 'a separate bonus task.' Participants who viewed this fourth review as the last step in their ongoing work were more likely to choose to work more sooner (over less later) than participants who viewed this fourth review as separate bonus work. Thus, when people consider an upcoming task as completing something they have already started, they are more willing to work extra to complete it sooner.

Without accounting for the goal-generic benefits of achieving closure on a goal, these findings seem to imply negative time discounting, where people discount the present more than the future. It would appear as if they were willing to pay a premium to incur a cost sooner rather than to incur it later. Yet, when accounting for the goal-generic value of closure from completion, the findings can be interpreted as a reasonable trade. People are

sometimes willing to pay a premium, through money or effort, in exchange for the goal-generic benefit of closure.

2.4 | Paying for Goal-Generic Value: Setting a Price for Completion Opportunities

In another series of studies, researchers sought to determine the price people would set for the experience of completing the last step in a sequence (Ruan et al., 2023). The authors noted that "an individual close to completing something is aware that they will soon … reap the hedonic benefits that accompany a feeling of completion" (p. 947). If people anticipate the utility of mere completion, they might counterintuitively sell something nearly complete for a higher price than its completed counterpart.

In one study, researchers tested whether participants who had the opportunity to sell an item that was one step away from being complete would demand a higher price than would participants who had the opportunity to sell an item that was already complete (Ruan et al., 2023, Study 1). In the opening phase of this study, participants collected virtual pieces of a $1 Amazon gift card by completing surveys. At first, the card was represented by four grayscale segments. Each time participants completed a (filler) survey, they received one piece of the card, represented by a grayscale segment changing to a color segment. In the next phase of the study, researchers elicited participants' willingness-to-accept price for the gift card, using an incentive-compatible method. Participants set their selling price either after they had done all four steps to complete and earn the $1 gift card or after they had done only three steps and were thus one step away from earning the $1 gift card. Participants in the "one-away" condition demanded 13% more money for their cards

($0.95 vs. $0.84) than did participants in the completed-item condition, suggesting that they prospectively valued the experience of collecting the last stamp and finishing the card.

If participants were accounting for only the goal-specific extrinsic value of their cards, they should have demanded higher prices for the complete cards. These cards required no additional work to be eligible for their contingent reward. Yet, participants' average demands showed the opposite pattern, whereby they wanted more money for the cards that were not yet done but that would grant the owner the experience of completion. Thus, when one accounts for the goal-generic value of feeling good about taking the last step to complete something, it is clearer why some individuals would demand more money for the almost-complete card.

3 | THE GENERIC VALUE OF HAVING GOALS

People need to be absorbed. They need to be preoccupied nearly all the time with something that can make them feel awe, curiosity, pleasure, love, hate, relief, amusement, pride, lust, devotion, communion. An enormous part of the human drama is taken up with finding content for the form. (Klinger, 1977, p.4)

Many accounts of subjective well-being have made strong claims about the importance of having goals, whatever those goals are (e.g., Emmons, 2003; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Scheier et al., 2006). Although the empirical work that followed often focused on the goal-specific question of what kinds of goals create the best conditions for a good life, the underlying theories consistently emphasized that any goal will do. In contrast, lack of goals characterizes meaninglessness, purposelessness, and hopelessness. Klinger's quote above puts a fine point on this idea by asserting that humans must often search for (specific) goal content in order to facilitate the (generic) experience of having goals.

While Klinger's theorizing may be among the most forceful, it is not unique in the presumption that having goals, whatever they are, provides meaning. Emmons, for instance, posits that, "without goals, life would lack structure and purpose" (2003, p. 106). He joins Klinger and others in arguing that goals "determine the contents of consciousness," which, in turn, determines the subjective quality of one's life (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Klinger, 1975; 1998). Other facets of a good life, beyond meaning, similarly emphasize the generic importance of goals. For example, people also seek *richness* through variety and broadened perspective (Oishi & Westgate, 2022); and richness, like meaning, requires goals. Having goals prompts *curiosity* and promotes *exploration* (Hsee & Ruan, 2016; Kashdan et al., 2004; Loewenstein, 1994; Oishi & Westgate, 2022), which in turn facilitates a life with varied, perspective-enhancing experiences.

Some descriptive studies have taken important, if preliminary, steps toward documenting self-reported value in merely having goals. An ethnographic study of extreme runners, for instance, found that once completing a single marathon has turned into a routine activity, many devotees invent new, somewhat arbitrary goals so that they can continue to experiment with their bodies and training (Gross, 2021). This finding appears to reflect the common interest-enhancing strategy of turning boring task content into a higher-value experience by inventing challenging goals (Sansone et al., 1992). In a broad sense, this practice is one that many people endorse. For example, Klinger (1977) collected and analyzed free-responses from a group of American undergraduates asked to describe what gives their lives meaning. The second most common category of responses (after *personal relationships*) was *having future goals, in general*. When a second group of students completed a checklist assembled from the first group's responses, 71% indicated

that having goals in general was at least moderately important in giving their lives meaning.

Despite intriguing clues about the value of merely having goals, this facet of goal-generic value remains, at this time, the most speculative. New empirical approaches will be needed to compellingly isolate the value of having goals from the value of progressing on and achieving those goals.

4 | THE GENERIC VALUE OF PROGRESSING ON GOALS

Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work. (Amabile & Kramer, 2011)

Tens of thousands of diary reports from hundreds of knowledge workers led Amabile and colleagues to declare that *progress* toward meaningful work is one of the most important aspects of a vital workplace, a proposition they refer to as "The Progress Principle" (Amabile et al., 2005; Amabile & Pratt, 2016). This research used diary entries to test whether daily variation in progress is associated with positive experiences, while allowing each individual's profile of specific goals to vary naturally. On days that the knowledge workers made progress toward their goals, they expressed more joy, warmth, and pride. They also experienced more intrinsic motivation and perceived more positivity related to their work and teams. The same correlation has appeared consistently and in different settings: A meta-analysis of 85 studies showed significant positive associations between one's experience of goal progress and one's reports of subjective well-being (Klug & Maier, 2015). While more work would be needed to determine causality and to separate the goal-generic experience of progress from goal-specific engagement in a meaningful

activity, these studies are at least suggestive of goal-generic value from progress. The findings also dovetail with work documenting that individuals who are more consistently focused on locomotion – the regulatory mode that governs movement – find more joy in the experience of their pursuits (Pierro et al., 2006), report more purpose in life (Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis et al., 2017), and feel less depressed (Hong et al., 2004; Kruglanski et al., 2000). These associations as well could reflect multiple causal paths, but they are consistent with the idea that there is value in experiencing movement toward goals.

A leading explanation for classic goal gradient effects, whereby people increase their efforts as they near goal completion, is that people value subjectively larger steps toward a goal over subjectively smaller ones (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Cryder et al., 2013; Heath et al., 1999). Thus, even when holding completion proximity constant, people are more willing to work for steps that feel like they involve more progress. For instance, when people are just getting started on a goal, their steps will feel bigger if they focus on where they started rather than where they will end (Koo & Fishbach, 2012). Reading Chapter 3 of a long novel feels like a big step forward to someone focused on having read the first two chapters, but it feels like a small step forward to someone focused on the twenty chapters that remain. Thus, at the beginning of goal pursuit, people find more value in a given action if they focus on accumulated rather than remaining progress; but at the end of goal pursuit, they find more value in a given action if they focus on remaining rather than accumulated progress (Koo & Fishbach, 2012; and see Bonezzi et al., 2011, for the argument that people spontaneously direct their attention accordingly). The premium people place on actions that seem to have a bigger impact appears to support the idea that they value the experience of progress in and of itself. Moving quickly toward

goals, rather than slowly, seems to similarly increase the value of a given action. Here again, even holding completion proximity constant, people feel more positive about fast versus slow progress (Hsee & Abelson, 1991; Lawrence et al., 2002). Because these paradigms hold goal proximity constant while varying subjective impressions of movement, they provide good evidence that there is value in the progress itself, separate from the value of attainment.

Research on the phenomenon of *pre-crastination* is also consistent with the goal-generic progress hypothesis. Pre-crastination was identified when researchers found an unexpected pattern of workload choices among participants in a physical-activity experiment (Rosenbaum et al., 2014). Participants' task was to walk from a fixed start line to a fixed finish line at the end of a hallway and to pick up one of two heavy buckets along the way. One bucket was positioned closer to the start line, and thus required more work to get it to the finish line, while the other bucket was positioned further from the start line, and thus required less work to get it to the finish line. Although the researchers expected participants to favor the lesser workload of carrying the second bucket, participants routinely favored the greater workload of carrying the first bucket. One potential explanation is that participants wanted to hasten the experience of progress. If they construed the task as, "carry a bucket to the finish line" (rather than, "walk to a bucket and then carry it to the finish line"), then picking up a bucket as soon as possible would provide them an experience of progress sooner rather than later. Subsequent investigations have compellingly implicated a different explanation – the desire to reduce the cognitive load of remembering different subgoals (see Patterson & Kahan, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2019) – but the behavior could be multiply determined.

At least three different research approaches appear to illustrate that people find value in the generic experience of progress. Cross-sectional studies link daily progress to daily positivity. Others link a focus on movement to overall well-being. Experimental studies hold objective completion proximity constant and find that people are more motivated by actions that provide subjectively bigger or faster experiences of progress. And other experimental studies suggest that people may do more work if it allows them to experience progress sooner. More direct evidence of deliberate tradeoffs would bolster the case, but these studies provide a promising start.

5 | GOAL-GENERIC BENEFITS, COSTS, AND CONFLICT

Though we have focused on goal-generic benefits, potential costs also warrant consideration. The same action that increases goal-generic benefits in some situations may instead increase goal-generic costs in other situations. For example, while adding some goals to one's life promotes a beneficial sense of purpose, adding too many brings costly sources of unresolved tension. Long lists of incomplete goals can lead people to feel overwhelmed, anxious, and indecisive (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Kelly et al., 2015; Mayer & Freund, 2022). Similarly, while completing goals provides closure and a sense of accomplishment, it also eliminates a source of potential progress. (You can't have your cake and eat it too.) As people approach major accomplishments, they often report a mix of emotions that reflect imminent achievement and imminent loss (Berrios et al., 2017; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008; Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). Determining the extent to which that prospective loss reflects goal-generic value (which should be more easily

substitutable) versus goal-specific value (which is not) would suggest different methods to support coping and adjustment.

More broadly, focusing scholarly attention on goal-generic value may advance understanding of different kinds of goal conflicts. Goal-conflict research has long provided useful frameworks for understanding how people navigate the inevitable tradeoffs between their many opportunities and challenges; but it has mostly focused on conflicts that derive from goal-specific sources of value. Identifying situations where goal-generic costs fuel conflict may provide important practical and theoretical insights. Decisions about how work fits into society and human experience pushes some of these questions to the forefront. For instance, what will be the net consequences of offloading certain tasks to artificial intelligence? On one hand, this should free people from certain laborious tasks; on the other hand, it may deprive them of some of the opportunities they felt they had to make meaningful contributions (Agrawal et al., 2022). As another example, what are the tradeoffs of work requirements in social-assitance programs? Traditionally, the utility of working is assumed to be strictly tied to the income that enables subsequent consumption, suggesting that only the money matters, not the work that earns the money. But work also provides utility by giving people something to do (i.e., a goal-generic benefit; Pfeffer, 1998; Schwartz, 2015). Consider a lab-in-the-field experiment that compared the effects of a "workfare" versus "welfare" program on the wellbeing of individuals who were living below the poverty line in an urban settlement in Kenya (Bhanot et al., 2018). Over the course of ten weekdays, researchers observed higher levels of self-reported wellbeing among participants who worked for their vouchers by completing one hour of a tedious task each day compared to those who spent the same amount of time in an administrative office

merely waiting for their vouchers. It would be hard to attribute this difference to goal-specific intrinsic value given that the waiters were allowed to chat and read whereas the workers were separating lentils from rice for unspecified reasons. Consistent with the idea of goal-generic value, the researchers suggest that "the material benefit of a workfare-style program may not be the only source of utility" and "that the act of working itself might also positively influence well-being" (p. 380).

6 | BEYOND GOALS: COMPETENCE, CONTROL, AND CURIOSITY

The framework we offer here focuses on the experience of goals. It applies to the benefits and costs of goal-setting, goal-striving, and goal-accomplishment. But it may, from a broader view, connect to more general sources of behavioral value. As motivation scientists catalog an ever-growing number of different goals, priorities, and motivations that guide behavior, the possibility that an action is driven by the fundamental desire to be *doing* something is sometimes lost. A behavioral scientist seeking to explain the pursuit of a particular goal might therefore ask to what extent it is attributable to the content of *that* goal versus the generic pursuit of *a* goal. While people enjoy certain activities and seek certain rewards, they are also broadly motivated to explore, learn, and feel effective in managing what happens in their environment (see Higgins, 2012; Bandura, 1982; Berlyne, 1966; Deci & Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). Returning to Klinger's words, many goal pursuits manifest people's "finding content for the form" (1977, p.4). Our argument here is not that goals are the only way to be effective in the world. We do not claim they are necessary for establishing competence. But they sure seem useful as a psychological tool. Setting them

provides the opportunity to have an impact. Achieving them proves that you did. Goal-generic value seems central to the more fundamental desire for control.

Yet, even if goal-generic value derives from a universal need to be active and impactful, the concrete experiences that provide goal-generic value are unlikely to be universal. Even if everyone is driven to be effective, it is probably not the case that everyone sees finishing a to-do list as a valuable way to do so. This raises a sweeping question about what kinds of experiences receive high (vs. low) goal-generic valuations in different cultural settings. In productivity-oriented Western society, for instance, people tend to celebrate busyness, ambition, persistence, and achievement (Bellezza et al., 2017; Meacham, 1988; Wingrove & Fitzsimons, 2022). In fact, the more that people subscribe to such a productivity orientation, the more likely they are to spend even their limited leisure time working through manufactured lists of experiences and achievements (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). But cultural beliefs about goal-setting and goal-pursuit are likely to differ in systematic ways (Hofstede, 1980; Maehr, 1974; Schwartz, 1992). Some cultures may have quite different beliefs about striving and busyness; and, yet, people from those cultures surely feel motivated to explore, develop, and be effective (White, 1959). Thus, studies that identify variation in these beliefs and then empirically link them to goal-generic value perceptions would help to describe the different manifestations and trace the learning processes that contribute to them (Dickinson & Balleine, 1994).

7 | CONCLUSION: WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD?

Why did the chicken cross the road? The comedian's answer, of course, is, "To get to the other side." The classical economist's answer is, "To receive the incentives associated

with doing so." And the traditional psychologist's addendum has been, "But perhaps also for the intrinsic experience of the journey." Our goal here has been to expand on this collection of answers. We have argued that a full accounting of the potential value of any goal pursuit should include not only the intrinsic and extrinsic value determined by the idiosyncratic goal but also the value that may be found in the subjective experience of having goals, pursuing goals, and completing goals.

So, why did the chicken want to get to the other side of the road? Perhaps a shiny can of corn across the way beckoned with extrinsic value. Or perhaps a chance to stretch its legs seemed like worthwhile intrinsic value. Indeed, examples such as these have been readily recognized by most accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic value. But why else might the chicken have wanted to cross the road? We have suggested here that other goal-related experiences might also influence the decision. Having a goal to cross the road each day might give the chicken a sense of purpose. Progressing from one side to the other might give the chicken a feeling of agency. And taking the final step up to the opposite sidewalk might provide the chicken a sense of accomplishment. At least the chicken could cross something off its to-do list.

While generalizing to chickens is speculative at best, we hope that torturing a classic joke makes the implications of goal-generic value clear. To understand the value that people seek through their pursuits, it helps to ask what value they are seeking from *the* goal and what value they are seeking from *a* goal. Auditing goals in a way that accounts for both the goal-specific consequences of doing that particular thing and the goal-generic consequences of working toward some thing provides a fuller picture of what drives goal pursuits.

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Figure 1

Total Goal Value as a Function of Goal-Specific Value and Goal-Generic Value

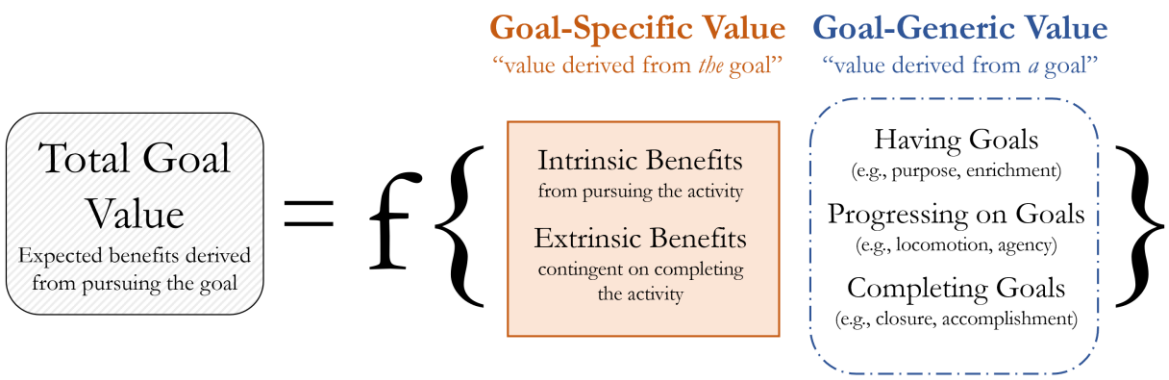
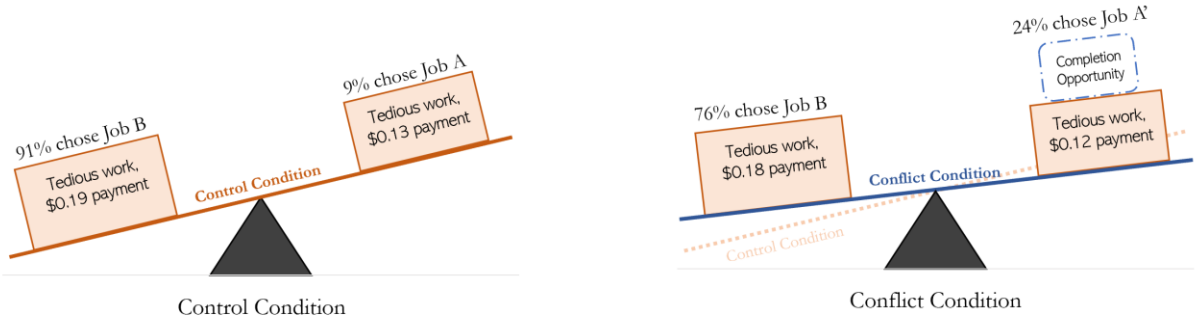


Figure 2

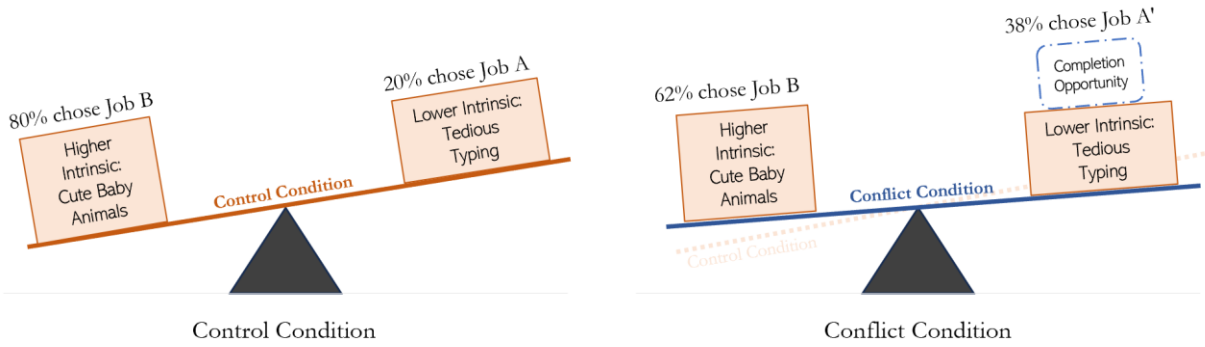
More Online Workers Chose a Lower-paying Tedious Task When It Also Offered a Completion Opportunity



Note. Left image depicts a control-condition choice between a higher-paying tedious job (Job B) and a lower-paying tedious job (Job A). Right image foregrounds a conflict-condition choice between a higher-paying tedious job (Job B) and a lower-paying tedious job that would complete an arbitrary sequence (Job A'), with the control-condition result in the background for visual comparison (dotted line). Results are from Study 1 of B. A. Converse et al., 2023, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *152*, 3021-3036.

Figure 3

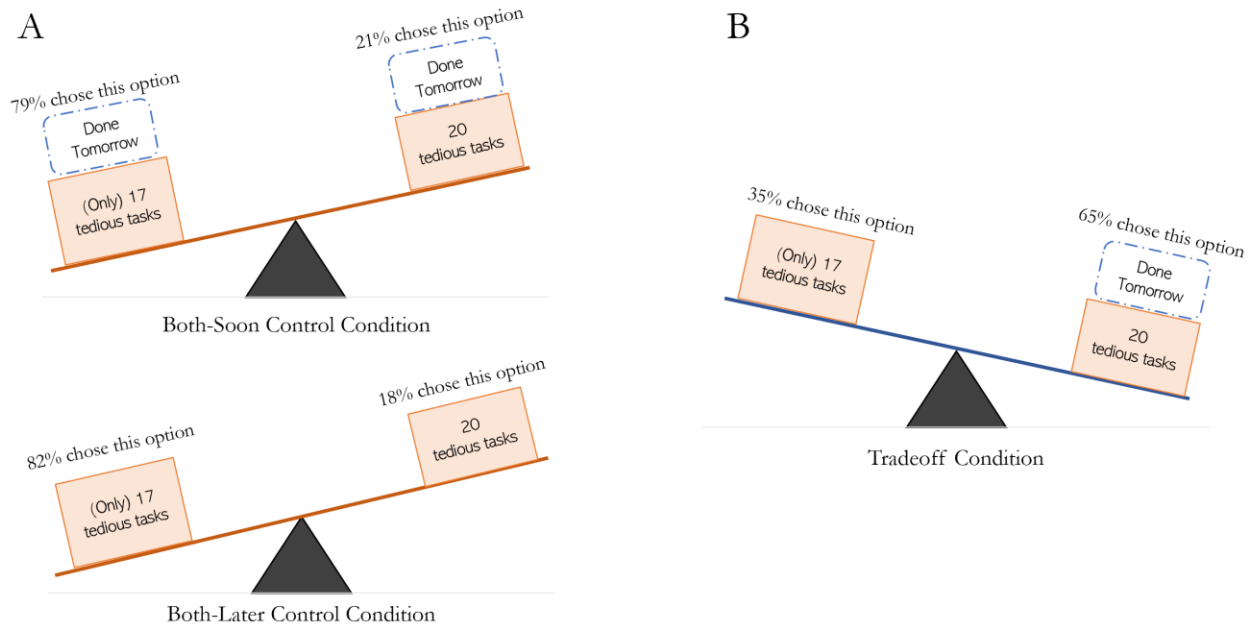
More Online Workers Chose a Less Enjoyable Task When It Also Offered a Completion Opportunity



Note. Left image depicts a control-condition choice between a fun job (Job B) and a tedious job (Job A). Right image foregrounds a conflict-condition choice between a fun job (Job B) and a tedious job that would complete an arbitrary sequence (Job A'), with the control-condition result in the background for visual comparison (dotted line). Results are from Study 2 of B. A. Converse et al., 2023, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *152*, 3021-3036.

Figure 4

More Online Workers Chose a Higher-Burden Task When It Also Offered Earlier Closure



Note. Panel A depicts choices from two control conditions. In "Both-Soon," participants chose between completing 17 tasks tomorrow and completing 20 tasks tomorrow. In "Both-Later," participants chose between completing 17 tasks a month later and completing 20 tasks a month later. Panel B depicts choices from a tradeoff condition, in which participants chose between completing 17 tedious tasks a month later and 20 tedious tasks tomorrow. The former required less work for the same payment, but the latter promised earlier closure. Results are from Study 2 of A. R. Roberts et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Advanced Online Publication*.