The Why of Consumption
Contemporary perspectives on consumer motives, goals, and desires

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Consumer goal structures and goal-determination processes

An integrative framework

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Over a half-century ago, Alderson (1957) argued that consumer behavior is best understood as problem-solving behavior. His functionalist approach was fundamentally concerned with the goals toward which consumers strive and the processes through which they seek to attain these goals. Unfortunately, attention to the nature and role of consumer goals waned afterward, due in large part to the information-processing revolution that swept both psychology (see, e.g., Sorrentino and Higgins 1986) and consumer research (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson 1987).

In the last decade or so, however, psychology has witnessed a renaissance of interest in goal-directed behavior (e.g., Bandura 1989; Cantor 1990; Cantor et al. 1987; Carver and Scheier 1996; Markus and Ruvolo 1989), most impressively evinced in Austin and Vancouver's (1996) comprehensive review and in books edited by Gollwitzer and Bargh (1996), Pervin (1989), and Higgins and Sorrentino (1990). So too, research on goals in consumer behavior is now receiving vigorous attention (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999; Bettman et al. 1998; Huffman and Houston 1993; Kleine et al. 1993; Park and Smith 1989; Pieters et al. 1995; Ratneshwar et al. 1996; Walker and Olson 1997; Reynolds and Gutman 1988; Sirsi et al. 1996).

Not surprisingly, the rapid growth and eclecticism of recent research in consumer goals has led to valuable but highly fragmented insights as each researcher has invariably emphasized different issues. For instance, some researchers have focused mainly on the structural relations between different goal levels, particularly those who have worked within the means-end paradigm (see, e.g., Pieters et al. 1995; Reynolds and Gutman 1988; see also Kleine et al. 1993; McCracken 1986; and Walker and Olson 1997 for alternative paradigms with a structural emphasis). Most often these studies have directly connected the being side of life (e.g. an individual's values or social identity) with its having side (preferred products and their features), typically via hierarchies in which consumers' values drive the desired psychosocial consequences of product consumption, and the latter, in turn, influence product preferences. As yet, however, consumer researchers have not effectively bridged higher and lower goals with the types
of mid-level goals (e.g. life projects, current concerns) that psychologists have recently explored to account for the doing side of life (see, e.g., Cantor 1990; Cantor et al. 1987; Emmons 1986; Gollwitzer 1996; Little 1989). In addition, the structural approaches have mostly adopted a macro-motivational perspective and, therefore, have rarely considered process issues regarding how goals at different levels impact on each other.

Although other researchers have eschewed structural concerns and addressed goal-determination processes, they have restricted themselves to micro-motivational perspectives (e.g. how consumers adapt lower-level goals such as product-feature preferences to proximal task and contextual factors; see Bettman et al. 1998). In general, researchers have yet to meld the macro and micro approaches to consumer goals (see, however, Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999 for a recent effort in this direction). Moreover, although a handful of researchers have argued persuasively for the inescapable role of situational influences on consumer goals – such as the social, cultural, physical, and temporal contexts of consumption (e.g. Belk 1975; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991; Sherry 1983; Brownstein et al., this volume) – most have simply ignored such factors and their relations to consumer goals.

For advancing theory and directing future research, there is a substantial need for a framework that addresses the hierarchical structure of consumer goals as well as the specific processes by which consumer goals are determined. We propose here such a framework in the context of consumer behavior that is assumed to be pragmatic, purposive, and problem-solving oriented (see Alderson 1957; Howard and Sheth 1969). We assume that goals are cognitive representations of desired end-states and these representations serve as standards in the control of behavior (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Carver and Scheier 1996). Hence, as presently developed, our framework does not explicitly address consumer behavior based on purely experiential or hedonic motives (see, e.g., Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Holt 1995); we also exclude from our scope unconscious and perhaps uncontrollable urges (see Faber, this volume; Rook 1987); finally, we do not examine here the role of emotions in goal formation, goal striving, and goal attainment (instead, see Bagozzi et al. and Luce et al., this volume).

A brief review of prior research on consumer goals

Research on consumer values and means-end chains

Higher-order goals such as a person's terminal values have often been stressed in explanations of individual differences in buyer behavior and media exposure (e.g. Kahle et al. 1986; Kamakura and Novak 1992; Richins 1994). Indeed, the most important forerunners of the structural component of our framework are means-end chain models that seek to connect product-feature preferences to a consumer's values (e.g. Pieters et al. 1995;
Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Although means-end chains are not intended to be a theory of individual goal-directed behavior *per se*, they clearly presume a hierarchy of goal levels at which a product’s concrete attributes might be interpreted and preferred by the consumer. Means-end chains do not usually consider situational influences on consumer goals or person-situation interactions (cf. Ratneshwar et al. 1996). Further, research on means-end chains has generally assumed static goal structures, with little discussion of how goals might evolve. Neither do means-end researchers inquire into the cognitive processes associated with goal formation and goal change. Finally, means-end theory does not offer middle-level goal constructs for bridging the large gap between higher-level, abstract goals at the being or self level with lower-level, concrete goals at the having level of preferred product features and benefits.

**Social identity theory**

Social identity theory in consumer behavior is largely based on two key notions. First, people are posited to take actions and consume products (at least in part) to enact identities consistent with their ideal selves (see Kleine et al. 1993; Sirgy 1982). This notion is related to the work of Markus and her colleagues in social psychology which posits that individuals strive and act to create ideal selves (see, e.g., Markus and Ruvolo 1989). Similarly, recent research by Fournier (1994) has focused on the idea that consumers’ relationships with brands may be based on meanings that are central to the individual’s self-concept. Second, social identity theory asserts that there is not just one global identity that a person enacts, but multiple identities (e.g. mother, professor, volunteer), triggered or activated as a function of the different social contexts in which the person moves (Kleine et al. 1993). Our multiple selves are thus assumed to be more or less salient in different contexts; the self or selves that are currently active are then the drivers of actions designed to establish and reinforce those selves. Social identity theory does not offer a precise formulation for how lower-order consumer goals are linked to the ideal self in a hierarchical goal structure, nor does it examine the specific processes by which goals at lower levels are formed and modified.

**Behavioral decision theory**

Behavioral decision theory is currently a major paradigm for investigating consumer choice processes. A dominant theme in this paradigm is that choice processes and outcomes are contingent on a number of contextual factors such as the set of available alternatives or their attribute values, and task factors such as time pressure (see, e.g., Bettman 1979; Bettman et al. 1998). Further, decision-makers are thought to adapt to such variables in a dynamic fashion such that feature preferences are often constructed – not
merely revealed – in judgment and choice tasks. Clearly, behavioral decision theory has produced an impressive body of knowledge on process issues, and it has contributed the view that consumers adapt in a dynamic fashion to their choice environments. Nonetheless, work in this genre has usually ignored macro motivational factors such as an individual’s values. Also, the effects of many situational variables (e.g. social surroundings, physical environment) on consumers’ goals, and the effects of different types and levels of goals on each other, have rarely been considered.

**Attitude theory**

Attitude theory (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) can explain at least part of the cognition-motivation interface associated with goals (see, e.g., Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990). Consumer research based on attitude theory mainly emphasizes how preferences are derived from individuals’ expectancies and evaluations concerning product beliefs (e.g. Lutz 1977). These beliefs are usually at the level of lower-level goals such as the product benefits and features desired by a consumer. The theory does not detail a process model for how and why the evaluative components of attitude structure can change. Further, in contrast to behavioral decision research, it does not account for consumer adaptation to proximal contextual factors such as the set of available alternatives. Instead, attitude theory considers contextual influence in the form of social norms and an individual’s motivation to comply with those norms (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990).

**Summary**

We summarize in Table 2.1 the theoretical issues that have been emphasized in each of the aforementioned approaches. Means-end research and social identity theory have focused on structural issues and linkages between goals at the level of being (or self) and lower-order goals such as preferred product features. These two paradigms have given relatively little attention to cognitive process issues. Behavioral decision theory and attitude theory have examined in some depth cognitive processes in goal determination, but have generally restricted themselves to lower-order consumer goals. Behavioral decision theory and social identity theory are inherently dynamic in their conceptualization (especially the former). In contrast, means-end models and attitude theory are relatively static in terms of their implications for consumer goals. The four approaches also vary in their emphasis on contextual factors. Behavioral decision theory heavily emphasizes the role of the immediate or proximal choice context, while social identity theory and attitude theory emphasize the social context of behavior. Means-end research is probably the most person-centered in terms of the locus of consumer behavior and, concomitantly, pays the least attention to contextual factors.
Table 2.1 Focus of prior research on consumer goals

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Overview of the present framework

Our framework presented below adopts several key ideas from the different research paradigms discussed earlier, and it seeks to build on these ideas in order to present a more comprehensive and integrative view of consumer goal structures and goal-determination processes. As in means-end theory, social identity theory, and Carver and Scheier’s action control theory (1996), we postulate a hierarchical goal structure (see also Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999). Discrete levels are integral to any hierarchical system, even though they must be viewed to some extent as simply a matter of epistemological convenience (Allen and Starr 1982). Therefore, our framework proposes six discrete levels of goals wherein higher-level (vs. lower-level) goals are more abstract, more inclusive, and less mutable. In descending order of abstraction, these goal levels are life themes and values, life projects, current concerns, consumption intentions, benefits sought, and feature preferences (see Figure 2.1). Later we define and discuss each level in detail with several examples and examine the interrelationships among goal levels.

We refer to the individual’s conscious process of constructing and modifying goals as goal determination. In accordance with much recent research in social psychology (see, e.g., Cantor 1990; Carver and Scheier 1996; Gollwitzer 1996), we stress an intentional or purposive view of goal determination. We posit that the process of goal determination typically includes thinking about relations among goals (e.g. regarding their mutual consistency) and considering the implications of satisfying one goal for the achievement (or not) of other goals. Further, as implied by behavioral decision theory and social identity theory, we adopt a dynamic view of goal determination wherein consumer goals are formed and altered during decision-making in light of contextual information.

In our framework, there are two main psychological forces for goal determination, goal alignment and goal adaptation (see Figure 2.2). Alignment
Figure 2.1 A hierarchical model of consumer goals.

Figure 2.2 A model of goal-determination processes.
refers to processes by which goals at different levels in the hierarchy mutually influence each other such that the system as a whole tends towards consistency and congruence. The need for alignment is based on the concept that people find it functional to avoid inner conflict, and the stress and negative affect that ensue from such conflict, by maintaining harmony among various aspects of the self, including their goals (cf. Emmons 1986; Heider 1958).

Goal alignment is postulated to occur through both top-down and bottom-up processes. As is implicit in means-end theory and social identity theory, we propose that higher-level goals often shape and give meaning to goals at lower levels. This top-down goal alignment process is termed incorporation (see Figure 2.2). Although people would do well to regularly consider their higher-order goals in order to guide their day-to-day decisions, often the reverse is true. Considerable research in behavioral decision theory suggests that a decision situation can prompt an analysis of one’s values (see, e.g., Keeney 1988). In such situations, lower-level goals such as revealed feature-preferences may shape and constrain higher-level goals. This type of bottom-up goal alignment process is termed goal abstraction.

The second main force for goal determination is adaptation, in which an individual’s goals are shaped by contextual factors. In our framework, we provide for a wide range of macro and micro contextual influences on consumer goals; these include a person’s general sociocultural environment, social and spatiotemporal aspects of product consumption situations, and the context of available choice alternatives.

**A hierarchical model of consumer goal structure**

We define and elaborate below each of the six goal levels in our structural model. We use the three consumer behavior vignettes in Table 2.2 to illustrate our key points. Our structural analysis of the goals of the consumers (Jack, Carol, and Marty) in these vignettes is summarized in Table 2.3.

**Life themes and values**

Life themes and values are defined as personal ideals of being, and they represent the highest goal level in our framework. According to Rokeach (1968), a terminal value is an enduring belief that an end-state of existence (e.g., freedom, wisdom, family unity) is preferable to other possible end-states (cf. Levy 1981). Life themes are related existential concerns that individuals address in daily life. Compared to sociocultural values, life themes are more distinctly rooted in personal history: individuals attempt to create a thematic coherence to their lives even as they undergo transformational experiences in childhood, family relations, schooling, and ongoing choices in adult life (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979).
Table 2.2 Three consumer behavior vignettes

**Jack:** Jack grew up on a farm in central Illinois, with three brothers and two sisters. Jack volunteered to serve in Vietnam in the late 1960s and then went to college on the G.I. Bill. He majored in agronomy and business. For the last 20 years Jack has been working as a sales representative in the Midwest for an agricultural machinery manufacturer. Jack's employer wants him to double the distribution of the line by entering new territories, so Jack has been considering the purchase of another automobile for making more frequent and longer trips to contact new potential distributors. Jack wants a car that is not likely to stand out or offend local sensibilities and will also be dependable and serviceable anywhere he goes. Jack visits the Ford, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Buick, Oldsmobile, and Pontiac dealerships in his area, but not Subaru, Honda, or Volkswagen. He also test drives ten different car models. After haggling over car prices with two dealerships and taking two models home for further test drives, Jack decides to buy a white Ford Taurus with grey cloth interior, automatic transmission, and cruise control.

**Marty:** Marty's mother is a painter and his father is an English professor. He himself excelled in art classes, developing a strong interest in art history and museum management. Marty has just arrived at State U. to study arts administration and has moved into a small three-bedroom apartment with two friends from high school. He has saved $200 for buying a new desk and a tall bookcase to accommodate his many books. Marty accompanies his roommates to a Wal-Mart store to shop for furniture. Both friends take a quick interest in some desks made from pressboard, priced at $89. While they decide to buy, Marty realizes he is not satisfied with them and chooses to wait and look further. Over the next week Marty visits six local antique shops, hoping to find a solid wood desk, one with craftsmanship quality and distinctiveness. However, Marty cannot seem to find anything he likes which he can afford. Then, one day he notices a full-page ad for the grand opening of a second-hand furniture shop. Grabbing his car keys, he heads out for the shop. Once there, Marty notices that the store has many desks. He finds several that are small and nondescript, while others are huge and bulky. Then, his eyes catch on to a medium-sized, wood desk of 1930s art deco design, with a matching two-shelf bookcase. The cost is $170. Next to it is a nice solid oak missionary style desk with a matching chair and a tall bookcase, for $300. Marty would rather have the tall bookcase in the second set for his many books, but he only has $200 to spend. He re-examines the art deco set and wonders how he can manage with only a two-shelf bookcase. Reasoning that he can probably leave most of his books at his parents' house, he purchases the art deco set.

**Carol:** Growing up the daughter of a veterinarian, Carol has always believed in being kind to all animals, and she became a vegetarian at an early age. Two months ago Carol and her husband, Steve, moved from Seattle to Pittsburgh. Carol has made some new friends, including a neighbor named Jane who casually mentioned one day that she was curious about vegetarianism. Carol has invited Jane over for lunch this coming Wednesday, along with another neighbor named Susan. She wants the two of them to experience a fresh and surprisingly tasty vegetarian lunch, and she believes she has a good idea. It is a meatless chili made from tofu, beans, tomatoes, onions, green pepper, and spices. Every time Carol makes this dish for unsuspecting guests, they never recognize the tofu and always like it. On Tuesday afternoon Carol drives to the grocery store to buy ingredients for cooking. However, the store is out of tofu. Carol feels frustrated and not certain what her next best option may be, especially since she doesn't have her recipe books with her. But a display of fresh herbs in the produce section catches her eye and jogs her memory. She recalls that she has occasionally fixed a spicy vegetable stew that has been very successful at past dinner parties and pot-lucks. Fortunately, the store has everything she needs to make the stew. She buys ingredients for the stew as well as for an appetizer, gets a light dessert from the bakery, and heads home.
Life themes are fruitfully conceived in a dialectical fashion that reflects the existential tension experienced by individuals, e.g. being active versus being passive and being truthful versus being false (see Mick and Buhl 1992). For instance, Carol’s childhood as the daughter of a veterinarian has fostered a life theme centered on being respectful versus disrespectful toward all living creatures. Similarly, Jack’s maturation in a traditional farming family and later experiences as a soldier in Vietnam have engendered a strong work ethic and patriotic devotion, suggesting that one of his life themes concerns being faithful versus unfaithful to one’s country.

Prior research suggests that both life themes and values are limited in number within the individual and are relatively invariant once developed (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979; Rokeach 1968). Together they represent core conceptions of self. Because they are so deeply embedded, interconnected, and central to maintaining the integrity of the self-system, they are likely to be relatively stable and accessible and thus easily activated across a variety of circumstances (Markus and Ruvolo 1989; Walker and Olson 1997). Moreover, once a value or life theme is internalized, it serves as a standard or yardstick to guide many lower-order goals and actions (Cantor et al. 1987; Markus and Ruvolo 1989; Rokeach 1968).
Life projects

Life projects are defined as the construction and maintenance of key life roles and identities (e.g., being a responsible mother, a loyal employee, a successful teacher). An individual may have several life projects at any given time (Kleine et al. 1993). Relative to life themes, life projects are somewhat in flux over the life span (though, relative to lower-level goals such as current concerns, life projects are still quite long-term). They are particularly likely to be modified when individuals go through life-stage transitions such as marriage, having a child, divorce, a new career, and retirement (Cantor et al. 1987). Carol’s life projects include being a good neighbor and being a supportive wife, while Marty wants to be a successful college student.

Current concerns

Current concerns are defined as activities, tasks, or quests in which an individual wants to be engaged in the short term (cf. Klinger 1977). Compared to life projects, current concerns are briefer in duration and less inclusive in their scope. Such goals are typically cognized in an individual’s consciousness as things that “need to be done” soon. Examples of current concerns include “find a job,” “lose fifteen pounds,” “go on a family vacation during the Christmas holidays,” and “cheer myself up.” As shown in Table 2.3, one of Jack’s current concerns is to expand distribution for his company’s products into new territories, while Carol’s include hosting a lunch for a neighbor.

Our conceptualization of current concerns is based on the work of several social psychologists who have proposed a similar goal level. Cantor’s “life tasks” (Cantor et al. 1987) are “problems that people are currently working on”; as such, they organize and give meaning to a person’s everyday activities. Similarly, Little’s “personal projects” are interrelated sequences of actions intended to achieve a personal goal (Little 1989). To assess current concerns, Cantor and her colleagues (Cantor et al. 1987; Zirkel and Cantor 1990) have successfully used interview probes such as “tell me about the things you are currently trying to do or accomplish.”

In our framework, current concerns are things that are “on top of one’s mind” in terms of activities and problems in which one chooses to be engaged, both mentally and physically. For example, Marty has a current concern of organizing his new apartment, while Carol is planning to host a lunch for a neighbor. Since satisfying current concerns requires the allocation of one’s time for undertaking and completing specific activities or tasks, goals at this level play a critical role in guiding the consumption of discretionary time (see, e.g., Cotte and Ratneshwar, this volume).

Consumption intentions

Consumption intentions are defined as individuals’ aims and desires to engage in particular product consumption and use behaviors (Belk 1975,
Belk et al., this volume; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). For example, a consumption intention can refer to a person’s aim to commute to work by using the subway or to invest retirement savings in a mutual fund; it can also refer to a person’s desire to drink a glass of wine with dinner or to gamble at a casino.

Consumption intentions help break down or “unpack” a current concern into a set of specific action sub-goals; satisfying a current concern usually involves goals related to the purchase and consumption of multiple and complementary products and services. For example, Marty has a current concern of organizing his apartment. Given this current concern, he might aim to purchase and use a set of matching furniture for actions such as sitting, sleeping, studying, and storing. As another example, given her current concern of hosting a lunch for a neighbor, Carol might desire to make several complementary purchases such as an appetizer, the ingredients for an entree, dessert, beverages, and a decorative floral arrangement.

Benefits sought

Benefits sought are defined as the consequences that are desired from ownership, usage, and disposal of a product (Myers and Shocker 1981; Olson and Reynolds 1983; Young and Feigin 1975). For example, Marty seeks a desk and bookshelves that are attractive in appearance and therefore consistent with his aesthetic disposition; he also wants them to fit into a small space and a student’s budget. Jack desires a car that is comfortable, dependable, and conservative.

Feature preferences

Feature preferences are defined as preferred product feature levels or values as stated in concrete physical or financial terms. In contrast to benefits sought, which are subjective and outcome-referent, feature preferences are relatively objective and product-referent (Myers and Shocker 1981; Ratneshwar et al. 1999; Zeithaml 1988). Feature preferences (e.g. the price of a car and whether it has anti-locking brakes) typically pertain to “search attributes,” while benefits sought (e.g. a car’s ride quality and safety) are more experiential (Nelson 1970).

Feature preferences often play an important role in consumer decision-making, largely on account of their concreteness and relative ease of cognitive processing. Obviously, feature preferences are likely to be highly influenced by pertinent benefits being sought by the consumer. Hence, Jack’s feature preferences among cars, Carol’s preferences among ingredients for her entree, and Marty’s preferences regarding furniture features, are all shaped by the respective benefits these individuals are seeking.
Relationships among goal levels

A common view is that goals at lower levels are designed to achieve the realization of higher-level goals such as an ideal self (Markus and Ruvolo 1989), and a number of consumer researchers imply such relationships among goal levels when they link consumer purchases and preferences to higher-order goals (see, e.g., Baggozzi and Dholakia 1999; Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982; Walker and Olson 1997). The relationships among our goal levels are conceptualized in accordance with the work of Kleine et al. (1993) who state that, “Ontologically, the self reflects Sartre’s (1943/1956) three states of existence (being, having, and doing) in the sense that one ‘is’ (has being) by virtue of what one does (which requires possessions, or ‘having’)” (p. 210). Therefore, in the simplest terms, the goal levels in our model are related by virtue of the fact that, over the long run, we acquire possessions to perform actions that move us closer to realizing our values and ideal selves (cf. Belk 1988).

In our framework, being goals are most closely associated with life themes and values (see Figure 2.1). This goal level refers to conceptions of cherished or desired self-states, that is, who a person is trying to be (see also Mick and Buhl 1992). Goals of doing signify purposeful activities and tasks in which people wish to be engaged; they often serve as behavioral means of achieving an ideal self. These goals are primarily represented in our framework by current concerns. In turn, goals of having are acquisitive means of facilitating or accomplishing a person’s doing goals, often in a manner consistent with his/her being goals (see Belk 1988). Having goals in our framework are mainly at the levels of benefits sought and feature preferences.

We conceptualize life projects and consumption intentions as goals at the interfaces of being and doing, and doing and having, respectively. Hence, these two goal levels have a dual character to them. Life projects concern the roles and identities that are important in one’s life; but in addition, since they are projects, they involve time- and effort-consuming actions. For example, Marty’s life project of being a successful student not only relates to who Marty wants to be but also points to the kinds of things he needs to do (e.g. organize his life and study hard). Consumption intentions refer to doing goals (e.g. eating, writing, traveling, relaxing) that involve allocation and depletion of resources – primarily money, time, and energy – available to the consumer. Notwithstanding, performance of these actions also requires one to have the necessary products as “props”: such things as food, a personal computer, a car, or a TV. Hence, Marty’s consumption intention of studying at a desk denotes an intention to engage in a specific action as well as the type of product he needs to acquire for accomplishing that action.

Goal-determination processes

As stated earlier, goal determination refers to the cognitive processes involved in constructing and modifying goals. We assume that goals at the doing level (current concerns, consumption intentions) and having level
(benefits sought, feature preferences) are the ones most proximal to purchase and consumption decisions. Further, we posit that consumer problem-solving typically begins with goal determination at the “things to do” level of current concerns and consumption intentions. Then, depending on various individual and situational factors such as perceived expertise and self-efficacy, involvement, accountability, desired decision confidence, and time pressure, the decision-maker may engage in varying degrees of goal determination involving additional goal levels (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Celsi and Olson 1988; Tetlock and Boettger 1989). Consistent with Gollwitzer (1996), our model does not assume that each and every consumer behavior is preceded by conscious goal determination just before the behavior occurs. Many behaviors are initiated merely to resume a pattern or sequence of actions that was put in place some time earlier. The goals that drive the entire action pattern may have been determined well in the past. As a result, goal determination often can be temporally separated from specific consumer behaviors.

We note that in many everyday purchase situations, the decision facing the consumer may be a familiar problem that has been solved many times in the past (e.g. what snacks to serve friends who come over on a Saturday night). In these cases, goals may often be determined only at the consumption intention level, and such goals may directly activate goal-associated “solutions” (specific products and brands) in memory (Barsalou 1991; Park and Smith 1989; Warlop and Ratneshwar 1993). Consequently, consumer decisions in such situations often will be made simply on the basis of finding a match between such known solutions retrieved in memory and the alternatives actually available and perceived in the choice environment. This process essentially corresponds to what traditionally has been termed “routinized problem-solving” in the consumer behavior literature (Howard and Sheth 1969). Obviously, in such situations there is little need for extensive goal determination (e.g. at the level of benefits sought and feature preferences), as both the criteria for decision-making and acceptable solutions are already known.

Nonetheless, as exemplified by all three of our vignettes, there are numerous decision situations where the situation is new and non-routine, at least to some extent. Consumer decisions that fall in this category are conducive to more extensive goal determination. We posit that in the course of goal determination related to these decision situations, goals will be influenced in a dynamic manner by related goals at other levels (via incorporation and abstraction) as well as contextual information (via adaptation), processes we discuss in detail below.

Incorporation

Incorporation refers to the top-down process wherein higher-level goals shape goals at lower levels. Incorporation helps the consumer to achieve
alignment (i.e. consistency and congruence) in the goal structure, and it enables the consumer to translate diffuse or ill-specified needs into relatively well-defined, actionable choice problems. Many life projects stem from and instantiate life themes. For example, Jack’s patriotism and work ethic lead him into a challenging sales career for an American manufacturer of farm equipment. Current concerns, in turn, reflect incorporation from life projects. Hence, Carol’s current concern of hosting lunch is considerably determined by her life project of being a good neighbor. Goals at lower levels such as benefits sought and feature preferences are subject to multiple incorporation influences from higher-level goals. For instance, consumption intentions often help determine which product benefits and features should be sought: Jack’s intention of making long road trips in a car for calling on his new distributors influences desired benefits such as a comfortable, dependable, and conservative car. Life themes and values also aid in determining consumer preferences at the having level; Carol’s life theme directly influences her choice of a vegetarian entree.

Incorporation involves several closely-related problem-solving processes. First, the individual may engage in means-end analysis, that is, he or she may assess the difference between a desired end-state (e.g. an important or salient higher-order goal) and the current state and devise means to reduce that difference (Carver and Scheier 1982; Miller et al. 1960). Cause-and-effect reasoning, scenario generation (simulation), and imagery are typical of the cognitive processes implicated in such means-end assessment (see Beach and Mitchell 1990; Markus and Ruvolo 1989; Sirsi et al. 1996; Walker and Olson 1997). For example, Jack may reason how owning and using a new car might facilitate his goal of expanding distribution; he might mentally simulate how his customers would react to a Cadillac versus a Ford Taurus; and he might draw conclusions about means-end fit by visualizing a BMW parked in his driveway and thinking “That’s not me.”

Constraint-setting is a related process of incorporation in which a high-level goal is broken down and refined into associated lower-level sub-goals, thereby facilitating problem solving (Barsalou 1991; Newell and Simon 1972). Barsalou (1991) theorizes that such constraints are often stored as a chain of associations among goals in connectionist networks in long-term memory. Incorporation occurs when activation of higher-order goals produces corresponding activation and retrieval into working memory of associated lower-order goals as well as related goal-derived category exemplars which are ideal for goal fulfillment (see also Ratneshwar et al. 1996).

An example of incorporation via constraint-setting and constraint chains could be Jack’s search for an new car. His consumption intention of acquiring a car for long business trips is progressively refined and constrained in terms of more concrete goals at the benefits sought and feature preferences levels. Thus, he first decides on an American car, based on his life theme of patriotism. He further limits his search to conservative
car models, thus incorporating his goal of not wanting to irritate his business customers by showing up in a flashy car. His feature preferences (e.g. cruise control, plain white exterior) are further constrained by consumption intention (a car for making long trips) and benefits sought (conservative appearance), respectively.

**Abstraction**

Abstraction refers to the bottom-up process wherein lower-level goals help determine what higher-level goals must be, if the lower-level goals are to hold and the lower and higher levels are to be consistent. Several models of the cognition–motivation interface in social psychology posit that in addition to the usual top-down processes (i.e. as in incorporation), goal influences may also flow upwards in a goal hierarchy (Carver and Scheier 1982; Emmons 1986; Vallacher and Wegner 1987).

Two general processes have been suggested in this regard. The first process holds when serendipitous discovery of a lower-level goal sensitizes a decision-maker to a related higher-level goal. Typically, this happens when a relatively concrete goal causes the recognition or activation of a pre-existing abstract goal that was previously not salient in consciousness (see Vallacher and Wegner 1987). For example, Marty’s negative reactions to and rejection of the pressboard desks favored by his roommates may have prompted recognition or reinforcement of his higher-level goal of being appreciative of aesthetics.

The second mechanism for abstraction is the creation of new higher-level goals to provide a coherent organizational structure for lower-level goals (Carver and Scheier 1982; Emmons 1986). Carver and Scheier (1982), drawing upon Piaget, suggest that goal abstraction is often the result of an inherent tendency in human beings toward organization of one’s cognitive structure in the service of self-assessment. For example, a consumer may reflect on her interest in high-risk leisure activities such as skydiving and use this behavior as a means of classifying herself at a life themes and values level (e.g. as thrill-seeking and adventurous; Celsi et al. 1993). A related notion is expressed in Anzai and Simon (1979), who demonstrate that inexperienced problem-solvers begin at a concrete level and over time organize their experiences into patterns of success and failure in order to derive more general and powerful problem-solving strategies. Both goal discovery and goal organization are likely to involve attribution processes, whereby an actor attempts to uncover higher-level, more abstract reasons for his/her lower-level goals (see Folkes 1984).

**Adaptation**

Adaptation refers to the goal determination process whereby goals are shaped by contextual factors. In our framework, these range from the macro
cultural and social environment for higher levels of goals (i.e. life themes and values, life projects), to social, spatial, and temporal aspects of the consumer’s environment for mid-level goals (i.e. current concerns, consumption intentions), to the context of available alternatives for lower-level goals (i.e. benefits sought, feature preferences). From a problem-solving perspective, adaptation denotes the adjustment of goals and problem representations to factors that are external to the individual.

We propose that contextual factors operate primarily in two ways. First, they may activate a subset of goals already established in one’s memory. For example, prior research has demonstrated that different social contexts (e.g. work-place versus recreation with friends) activate different goal-related aspects of the self (e.g. competent versus fun-loving; see Cantor et al. 1987; Carver and Scheier 1982; Kleine et al. 1993). Similarly, Walker and Olson (1997) argue that aspects of the self should be related to consumer behavior only when the situation activates those aspects, and that the particular values that influence behavior may be situation-specific. At the middle level of doing goals, research on situational influences in consumer behavior has provided ample evidence that the social and spatiotemporal aspects of the context (usage situation) in which a product is consumed are likely to activate and determine goals at the consumption intention, benefits sought, and feature preferences levels (Barsalou 1991; Belk 1975; Levy 1981; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991; Ratneshwar et al. 1996). For example, the need for a snack in mid-morning is likely to activate the benefits-sought goals of healthy and quick, whereas the need for a snack at midnight at a party with friends is likely to activate benefits such as filling and not messy to eat.

The strength with which specific goals are associated with particular contexts in long-term memory (e.g. the association of the work context with the goal of being competent) is likely to determine whether a certain goal is activated when the actor enters a given context. Associations between the context and particular goals may be learned in a variety of ways, including direct experience, word-of-mouth, and marketing communications. For example, one may learn from advertising that while any beer is okay to drink alone, drinking with friends requires a “special” beer. As argued persuasively by D’Andrade (1995), individuals tend to learn goals that are typical of a culture through vicarious observation of admired others and by experiencing a variety of gratifications for acting out culturally-sanctioned goals within particular contexts.

Second, the context may constrain a decision-maker’s perception of possible goals. In the case of being-level goals, the sociocultural context constrains the set of available (or acceptable) values and life projects for an individual (see Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979; McCracken 1986; Mick and Buhl 1992). Anthropological consumer research stresses that in most cases goals originate and are embedded within an indigenous cultural milieu that establishes the character, range, and practices of goals (see, e.g.,
Levy 1981; McCracken 1986). McCracken (1986), for example, has characterized life projects as each person's development of specific concepts (e.g. manliness, professorhood) from a range of culturally-established alternatives; people create and modify roles in their social performances because not all of the expectations and rules for enacting a role are prescribed. Cantor and her colleagues (e.g. Zirkel and Cantor 1990) argue that the cultural context, and the corresponding goals available for individuals, are age-graded as well. That is, various stages of life are associated with particular life projects and current concerns that are deemed appropriate for adoption. Thus, students entering college are assumed to have goals of establishing independence and a self-identity; graduating seniors are assumed to have goals of establishing a successful career, etc. Similarly, Levy's (1981) work illustrates how culture serves to establish goals related to consumption actions (e.g. eating prime rib instead of hot dogs and hamburgers) to which people adapt as the life span unfolds and different roles or life projects are assumed.

The context of the choice alternatives available to the consumer can also have a significant impact on the lower-level goals adopted (see, e.g., Simonson and Tversky 1992), particularly to the extent that the consumer uses only the information that is explicitly displayed (see Slovic 1972). In these cases, the consumer may adapt by fitting goals to what the alternatives offer. For example, when Marty realized that it was not possible to satisfy both his goal for a large bookcase and his goal for a price under $200, he adapted the goal that was more mutable, that of bookcase size. If different alternatives were available, he might have adapted his goals in a different manner. Similarly, because the grocery store did not have the required ingredients for Carol's first choice for a lunch entree, she decided to serve a vegetarian stew instead and adapted her purchases accordingly.

Relative likelihood of different goal-determination processes

Incorporation depends on the presence and salience of higher-level goals; it is also fostered when lower-order goals are absent or weakly held. In general, the salience or cognitive accessibility of higher-level goals will depend on the frequency and recency with which they have been activated in the past (Srull and Wyer 1986). Further, higher-level goals are also likely to become salient as a person goes through transitions in life projects (Cantor et al. 1987), thereby increasing the likelihood of incorporation. As an example, a new life project such as motherhood could result in incorporation with respect to lower-level goals a woman holds with regard to the purchase of a new car. The benefits sought might shift from sporty and fast to safe and reliable, and her feature preference on the number of doors may shift from two-door to four-door. Higher-level goals should also be more salient and incorporation more likely when consumer involvement in a purchase is relatively high (Celsi and Olson 1988; Walker and Olson 1997).
Correspondingly, abstraction is likely to play a substantial role in goal determination when problem-solving direction is not provided by salient higher-level goals (Park and Smith 1989). In addition, abstraction through discovery processes may be a strong possibility when concrete features of alternatives induce affective reactions in the decision-maker (Coombs, Dawes, and Tversky 1970; West 1996). Prior research suggests that three types of affective reactions enhance the chances that a consumer will abstract higher-level goals: (1) strong or extreme affect, (2) unexpected liking or disliking, and (3) negative affect in general. Research suggests that each of these outcomes is perceived as diagnostic and therefore may prompt an attribution analysis in order to identify likely causes; some of these causes may include higher-order goals (Folkes 1984; West 1996). Thus, Marty’s affective response to the pressboard desk may have prompted abstraction to understand why he disliked those desks so much.

Johnson’s (1984) findings regarding choice among “noncomparable” alternatives suggest still another factor that enhances the likelihood of abstraction. In his study, when subjects were given alternatives which were not easily comparable on concrete features, they tended to form more abstract representations of the features that were then more comparable across alternatives. Thus, the concrete features of a TV and a rowing machine might both be abstracted in a bottom-up fashion to a higher-level goal such as “entertainment” for making a decision. This relates to the organization process for abstraction that was discussed previously. Note, however, that consistent with our model’s assumptions, Park and Smith (1989) and Ratneshwar et al. (1996) provide evidence that when consumers have salient, pre-existing goals at the consumption intention and benefits sought levels, abstraction of goals from concrete features is minimal.

As in the case of abstraction, adaptation may play a more significant role in goal determination when high-level goals are weak or insufficiently elaborated in terms of associations with low-level goals. This view is consistent with Bettman et al.’s (1998) view that constructive choice processes may be used more when the consumer has little experience with the decision task at hand. Also, in many situations, translating a higher-level goal into subordinate goals during problem-solving may be a difficult and cognitively challenging process (Carver and Scheier 1982). In contrast, since adaptation does not require extensive consideration of inter-goal relationships, it may be less effortful than incorporation or abstraction. Thus, adaptation may be more likely when decision-makers are satisficing rather than optimizing. Satisficing decision-makers are unlikely to adopt goals that they perceive as unattainable (Bandura 1989), so they may tend to rely on the context of available alternatives to “suggest” possible goals.

Consumers who are particularly knowledgeable about contextual information and for whom it is highly salient in a choice situation may rely heavily on such information in goal determination. For example, Jack appeared to be very cognizant of the Midwestern sociocultural context in which he
operated as a sales manager, and he used his knowledge of his customers' sensitivities to help define his choice set of cars. Several individual and situational factors may enhance the salience of contextual information and, therefore, the role of adaptation in goal determination. First, prior research suggests that high self-monitors pay more attention to contextual information (see Snyder 1979); such individuals may be more likely to engage in adaptation than low self-monitors. Second, higher levels of accountability—the pressure to justify one's decisions to others—may motivate people to process contextual information more thoroughly, since such information may help defend or rationalize a particular choice (Simonson 1989; Tetlock and Boettger 1989). Hence, higher accountability may lead to adaptation being more likely in goal determination. Third, perceptible changes in the environment enhance the salience of contextual factors and, therefore, the likelihood of adaptation (see Carver and Scheier 1982; Zirkel and Cantor 1990).

Goal conflict and its resolution

Multiple goals across and within goal levels can be activated through the processes of incorporation, abstraction, and adaptation. These dynamics, and the inherent complexity of the goal system, often result in goal conflict or inconsistencies, as when, for example, pressures to adapt to situational factors clash with the mandates of higher-level goals such as an individual's values (Bell et al. 1988; Ratneshwar et al. 1996).

In cognitive terms, conflict may be avoided or approached during decision-making (Einhorn and Hogarth 1988; Luce et al., this volume). Frequently, the consumer may not be sufficiently motivated to resolve goal conflict or may not consider himself or herself capable of such conflict resolution. Non-resolution of conflict in some cases can be “achieved” through ignoring the incoherence or living with it (Slovic et al. 1988); ignoring goal conflict often results in non-compensatory strategies for choice (Einhorn and Hogarth 1988). Similarly, Montgomery (1989) proposed that the choice process is essentially one of searching for, and creating where necessary, a dominance structure among the available alternatives whereby one option can be seen as clearly superior to the others. In goal conflict situations, dominance sometimes can be created by adjusting the relative importance of conflicting goals and thereby reducing cognitive dissonance or by adding new goals for cognitively bolstering a particular alternative (see Kunda 1990). Such conflict avoidance processes essentially bypass or avoid resolution of conflict among goals.

In contrast, conflict approach generally requires effortful consideration of the goals in question and how they are related to other goals the individual might have (Einhorn and Hogarth 1988; Keeney 1988). Scant research has been conducted on goal conflict resolution at higher goal levels, although researchers often mention the issue (e.g. Carver and Scheier 1982; Kleine
et al. 1993). For example, social identity theory notes that people strive to attain consistency among their various identities (i.e. being-level goals) but does not specify how inconsistencies actually might be resolved (see Kleine et al. 1993). Carver and Scheier (1982) simply suggest that the goals associated with the more detailed plans for attainment, and/or the means associated with greater expectancies for goal attainment, are adopted over others (see also Bandura 1989). Conflict resolution has, however, been investigated at lower levels of goals in terms of how people make trade-offs among various product features (see, e.g., Bettman et al. 1998; Luce et al., this volume).

In some cases, conflict might be approached by making the decision more concrete, with the general assumption that concrete trade-offs are easier to make than more abstract trade-offs. This may be particularly true when the higher-level goals involved are emotion-laden (see Luce et al., this volume). For example, it may be easier to think about giving up a specific number of dollars for anti-lock brakes than it would be to think about trading off less wealth for more safety. Thus, an important avenue for future research is to determine how goals at various levels are traded off, and when and how goals at other levels in the goal structure are used to help resolve conflict. In addition, note that approaches other than simple approach/avoidance to goal conflict are also possible (Keeney 1988; Slovic et al. 1988). For example, the consumer may discover or synthesize new alternatives or approaches which allow conflicting goals to be satisfied. Consider Marty’s behavior (Table 2.2) when he encountered goal conflict between his preferences regarding furniture appearance, size of bookcase, and price. He synthesized a new approach (leaving some books with his parents) which allowed him to reduce the importance of bookcase size while satisfying his other goals.

Summary

We discussed in detail the processes of incorporation, abstraction, and adaptation in goal determination. We suggested in each case underlying cognitive “building-block” processes and mechanisms; these include means-end analysis, constraint-setting, goal discovery, goal organization, and goal activation. Subsequently, we examined factors that moderate the likelihood of the three fundamental processes of goal determination. It is noteworthy that in our framework these processes are not mutually exclusive, thereby allowing for conflicting and/or inconsistent goals. We then briefly discussed the issue of goal conflict and its resolution within the rubric of goal-determination dynamics.

Discussion

We have proposed a framework for goal structure and goal-determination processes as it applies to the genre of consumer behavior referred to as
problem-solving (cf. Alderson 1957; Howard and Sheth 1969). Our framework synthesizes and builds on recent ideas from several different areas of research, including social, cognitive, and humanistic psychology; behavioral decision theory; cultural anthropology; and prior consumer research. The result is a six-level hierarchical goal structure – spanning the being, doing, and having dimensions of life – which is fused by key goal-determination processes. These goal-determination processes encompass the interactions between goal levels, both top-down (incorporation) and bottom-up (abstraction), and the interaction of goals with numerous contextual factors (e.g., sociocultural environment, product usage situations, available alternatives) through adaptation. Overall, to our knowledge, it is the first broadly-applicable framework of consumer goals that explicitly melds goal structure and goal-determination processes in a parsimonious but principled manner. Inevitably, nonetheless, the framework harbors several limitations, some of which are discussed below.

Limitations

First, we note that each of the six goal levels in the framework was treated as a relatively unranked set of coterminous goals. In reality, within-level goals are likely to vary in their importance (e.g., a life project of being a loving father versus others such as being a helpful neighbor), and these variations deserve further consideration. For example, process explanations are needed for when and how one goal at a given level becomes more significant than another, and how conflicting goals at a given level (especially being- and doing-levels) are reconciled in relation to a given consumption event.

Second, we address here only consumer behavior that is goal driven in a relatively instrumental manner. Yet there is ample consumer behavior not explicitly guided by goals, notably autotelic activities, which can include attendance at sporting events (Holt 1993) or even substance abuse (Hirschman 1992). However, even activities that are highly experiential and seemingly for-their-own-sake can, in fact, be motivated by multiple goals, as Celsi et al. (1993) have astutely described with respect to sky diving. Indeed, several of their findings and interpretations readily conform to our structural model and goal-determination processes. For example, through the incorporation process, consumers with certain chronically-salient being goals (e.g., thrill-seeking, achievement) regularly engage in doing and having goals related to high-risk sport activities. Then, as their participation intensifies, they learn to associate other goals with the sub-cultural sport context and, through the adaptation process, they adopt other new goals accordingly (e.g., being-level goals of flow, communitas, and phatic communion with fellow enthusiasts; doing-level goals of riskier maneuvers; having-level goals of increasingly sophisticated sports gear).

Third, since our current framework takes a decidedly cognitive viewpoint on goals, there are many non-cognitive aspects of motivation that we have
obviously not addressed (see Austin and Vancouver 1996). For example, at present the emotional processes and consequences associated with goal striving may be difficult to include in the model if parsimony remains an objective. However, based on the work of Bagozzi and his colleagues, it is possible that emotions and our framework could be potentially consolidated by extending the focus to include goal pursuit and “trying” (Bagozzi et al., this volume; Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990). That research suggests that emotions elicited in anticipation of the consequences of achieving or not achieving a goal contribute to volitions; these volitions, in turn, guide the pursuit of the goal. Related to our framework, anticipatory emotions may serve key roles in goal determination, including whether incorporation, abstraction, or adaptation is the dominant process in goal determination. For example, Luce et al. (this volume) suggest that when consumers make trade-offs involving emotional attributes (e.g. family safety versus price), they tend to be conflict-avoiding rather than conflict-approaching. In terms of our framework, the implication might be that adaptation is more likely than incorporation or abstraction in such situations.

Finally, we emphasized the relatively cognizant activation of goals. An important future extension of the framework would be to consider subconscious goals in detail (e.g. as they relate to cultural myths or socially-sublimated desires). The determination, dynamics, and relationships of subconscious goals to conscious goals remain to be explored (see Coulter and Zaltman, this volume).

**Looking ahead**

It is our hope that our framework will serve as a theoretical foundation for empirical research in many different areas. For instance, our framework might be applied to goal-directed consumer behavior in domains as diverse as acculturation, gift-giving, household budget decisions, and time consumption. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to comment on some important methodological issues and challenges.

First, it is manifest that no single method such as participant observation, laddering interviews, scenarios, protocols, surveys, or experiments will be sufficient. Multiple methods are needed to fully appreciate goals that range from abstract life themes and values to concrete feature preferences, as well as processes that reflect adaptation to contextual aspects or goal alignment, up and down, across the various goal levels (see, e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Sirsi et al. 1996). One could imagine, for instance, studies that include autobiographical interviews, surveys, laddering techniques, accompanyment by researchers on product searches and purchases, and experiments involving scenarios that consumers respond to on scales or through verbalized reactions (see also the chapters in this volume by Brownstein et al.; Coulter and Zaltman; Escalas and Bettman). There is little doubt that significant empirical efforts for advancing theory and substantive knowledge on consumer goals must involve multiple methods, threading qualitative
and quantitative data into a fabric of understanding that justly reflects the variety and intricacy of consumer goals.

Second, our theorizing regarding goal-determination processes, and the vignettes we employed to bring the framework to life, indicate that most goals in real life are anything but fixed. If goals are inherently evolutionary, then investigating them empirically requires a commitment to longitudinal designs (see, e.g., Zirkel and Cantor 1990). An especially fruitful approach – but one with major operational challenges – would be to track consumers over time to examine how, when, and why their goal structures change. Fertile venues for studying these issues might include topics such as acculturation and household budget decisions. Future research endeavors on these lines may serve to validate the present theoretical framework. More importantly, such research may shed considerable light on how we can advance knowledge about consumer goals in a manner that is requisite with their complexity and dynamism.

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