Nonconscious Battles of Will: Implicit Reactions Against the Goals and Motives of Others

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Abstract

It is well understood that individuals’ own goals often conflict with the goals and preferences held by the people around them, but yet to be considered is how such interpersonal goal conflicts might emerge or escalate automatically in social situations. Past research suggests that individuals often automatically accommodate to the goals and preferences of the people around them; however, recent studies indicate that individuals also often automatically react against others by opposing their goals or by aggressing against those others’ preferences. It seems that mere knowledge about the goals and preferences of others can suffice to elicit counteractive responses, particularly when the individuals involved are nonconsciously pursuing goals that are oriented towards social divergence or competition (e.g., achievement, autonomy, self-enhancement). This suggests that interpersonal conflicts might often unfold automatically--that individuals may not always be consciously aware of the origins of their interpersonal conflicts or be aware that such conflicts even occurred.
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Some of the most complex and consuming relationships we experience involve people with whom we do not always agree—relationship partners whose wants, demands, and needs are incompatible with our own. When in the real or imagined presence of those relationships, we may not be so readily inclined to acquiesce to their interests, and research in recent years suggests that—much in contrast to our apparent assimilative tendencies (e.g., Aarts, Hassin, & Gollwitzer, 2004; Shah, 2003)—we will often automatically react against others and their goals. Although it may be important for people to get along with and be accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), so, too, is it important for them to regulate their affiliative tendencies and needs vis-a-vis their other desires—for personal autonomy, achievement, and positive-self regard—needs that may often be well-served by ignoring or even opposing the wills and wants of others. Managing such conflicting motivations is a fundamental issue in self-regulation (Cantor & Blanton, 1996), and although psychology has examined several ways in which such conflicts play out within the individuals’ own minds (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002; Shah & Kruglanski, 2002), it is not entirely clear how those conflicts play out in their interactions with others. Nevertheless, research in recent years suggests that reacting against others’ goals can often facilitate self-regulation in subtle but important ways—even if it ends up pushing people apart and undermining their relationships.

In the present chapter we consider three basic routes through which active goals can nonconsciously foment interpersonal conflicts and, to at least some extent, socially aggressive behavior. First, individuals’ nonconscious and chronic goals can influence their social perceptions in ways that put a negative or hostile tinge on their evaluations of others and their
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goals. Second, individuals may often react against the perceived goals and motives of others by either moving to counteract their influence or by adopting contrasting goals instead. Third, nonconscious goals often act as behavioral juggernauts in that they can operate and trigger aggressiveness towards others over the natural course of their pursuit. Taken together, we intend to demonstrate that active goals can nonconsciously encourage conflict and aggression by influencing how their pursuers perceive, react to, and generally behave towards others.

Nonconscious, Goal-Directed Social Behavior

Research in the last few decades has increasingly found that much of human behavior and goal pursuit is automatic, in that it occurs spontaneously, uncontrollably, and with little to no conscious intent or awareness (Bargh, 1994; see Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, for review). This means that many of the goals that individuals pursue may not be as subject to the types of conscious, deliberative processing that helps individuals behave in socially appropriate or acceptable ways (see also Richardson, this volume, on other kinds of passive and unconscious forms of aggression). Indeed, whereas pursuers of a consciously held goal might attend to interpersonal conflicts that arise by carefully reappraising their own goal and adjusting their goal-directed behavior, pursuers of a nonconsciously held goal may not. If one were consciously pursuing a highly competitive goal—say, to win a marathon, one might pursue it as only far as it isn’t hurting others or disrupting one’s relationships to those others. As negative feedback from others increased, particularly regarding one’s behavioral pursuit of the goal, one might respond by scaling back that pursuit or by finding other ways to ameliorate any rifts that were created (Carver & Scheier, 1998). With nonconscious goal-directed behavior, however, individuals may not be as sensitive to such feedback because their goal-directed actions are occurring largely outside their conscious awareness or control, and, therefore, any negative feedback they receive
from their environment may not be as easily attributed to the goal (Chartrand, Cheng, Dalton, & Tesser, in press). Indeed, obnoxious people often do not believe that they are being obnoxious (Cunningham, Barbee, & Druen, 1997; Davis & Schmidt, 1977), and this may be in part because they do not consciously realize how their behavior is influencing and affecting others.

The automaticity of socially aggressive behavior has been examined in past work by considering the associations that may form in memory between particular situations and certain behavioral responses (Todorov & Bargh, 2002), such that mere exposure to such situations in the future automatically invoke (or “prime”) a hostile or aversive behavioral reaction (Anderson & Carnagey, 2004; Ratelle, Baldwin, & Vallerand, 2005). In this chapter we will examine recent work suggesting that goals, too, may become linked in memory to situational cues to be triggered to activation automatically (Bargh, 1990). In some cases this could involve the direct activation of a socially aggressive goal (e.g., competition), while at other times this could involve the activation of concepts in memory that indirectly increase the aggressiveness of one’s behavioral pursuit of a given goal. As a classic example of this latter form of indirect influence, participants in one study who were subtly exposed to a series of rudeness-related words were later more likely to interrupt the experimenter in order to move on to the next part of the study (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Similarly, study participants have also been found to play more greedily on an “ultimatum game” by keeping more money for themselves when a corporate-style briefcase was subtly present in the room (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004). Even subliminal exposure to images of guns and other weapons—stimuli that represent physically violent means of attaining one’s goals—can increase the aggressiveness of individuals’ thoughts (Anderson, Arlin, & Bartholow, 1998). Exposure to cues representing other people whom individuals regard
as threatening may automatically invoke corresponding goals in memory (Gillath, et al., 2006), even if those cues are only incidentally related to their interaction partners.

Nonconscious, socially aggressive behavior may also have self-reinforcing qualities to them that might make it difficult for individuals to justify behaving in other ways. As classically demonstrated by Chen and Bargh (1998), participants who had been subliminally primed with Black faces subsequently demonstrated more hostility towards another White participant than participants who had primed with White faces. Interestingly, the other participant responded more aggressively in turn, effectively confirming the Black-primed participants’ initially hostile expectancies. This suggests that individuals store hostile scripts in memory that may be triggered incidentally by social cues to affect not just their own behavior, but also the corresponding behaviors of those with whom they interact. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that individuals who behave in aggressive or confrontational ways often regard their own actions as more justified than when they see others behaving in the same way (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

In effect, mere exposure to certain social cues—be they objects or people, behaviors or situations, can suffice to activate concepts in memory that set individuals against others and engender conflict with them (see also Forgas, this volume, on mood effects on spontaneous aggression towards Muslims). In the next several sections, we will examine research that considers how individuals’ nonconscious goals both instigate and are instigated by interpersonal conflict and aggression. We will examine how nonconsciously activated goals and chronic motives tinge and distort individuals’ perceptions of others in ways that lead them to “see” others in more hostile ways. We will then consider how cues to others’ goals seem to inherently pressure individuals to respond in kind, sometimes leading them to emulate the aggressive
pursuits of those around them and at other times leading them to react against others and their goals. In a third section we will examine how goals may, on their own, nonconsciously facilitate behavioral aggression over the natural course of their pursuit. The larger body of this work will focus on the ways in which nonconscious goals may engender conflicts of interest and interpersonal aggression, but we will conclude by reviewing important evidence suggesting that nonconscious goals also often serve to attenuate conflicts as well.

Part 1: Coming into conflict: The Polarizing Nature of Goals

Research in the last decade has identified at least two broad ways in which active goals can nonconsciously influence social perception: via evaluation and inference. Evaluations are the subjective assessments perceivers make of a target’s favorableness or unfavorableness, and inferences are the assumptions that perceivers make regarding the traits, preferences and goals that others possess. Evaluations and inferences can be highly automatic processes (Duckworth, Bargh, Garcia, & Chaiken, 2002; Hassin, Aarts, & Ferguson, 2005), and both have been found to operate in service of (and be skewed by) the perceivers’ active goals (Ferguson, 2005; Kawada, Oettingen, Gollwitzer, & Bargh, 2004).

We examine in this section research suggesting that active goals may nonconsciously influence how individuals evaluate their relationships to others and interpret the actions of those around them. In particular, we focus on the ways in which active goals can facilitate devaluation of relationships and disliking for people who do not facilitate goal pursuit. We will present evidence suggesting that active goals can nonconsciously lead individuals to regard others in
more negative and hostile ways, potentially setting those individuals against others in ways that create discord and undermine the social relationship. Indeed, the hostility that individuals nonconsciously bring into their social interactions can be self-reinforcing, for interaction partners who feel that they are being devalued and rejected tend to respond with greater anger and hostility themselves (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). At the earliest stages of perception, then, active goals may be operating to nonconsciously polarize individuals against others and, thus, set the stage for interpersonal conflict.

**Goal-Tinged Interpersonal Evaluations**

Goals have long been regarded as a filter for perceiving the world, leading individuals to evaluate stimuli as either positive or negative based on the relevance of those stimuli to the individuals’ current needs and goals (Lewin, 1935). Importantly, such goal-tinged evaluations occur spontaneously and without much conscious intent, awareness, or control (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). This means that individuals might automatically dismiss or devalue stimuli that are seen as irrelevant or interfering with their goals (Brendl, Markman, & Messner, 2003), even when such “stimuli” are other people. Indeed, recent work by Fitzsimons and Shah (2008) found that participants who were primed in advance with a nonconscious achievement goal (as opposed to not being primed with any goal in particular) reported lower relationship closeness and placed less importance on their relationships to others who were not instrumental to their pursuit of achievement. These goal-primed study participants were also more motivated to avoid noninstrumental others—indicating an implicit aversion to those relationships—while in active pursuit of their nonconscious goal.

Such goal-dependency in relationship evaluation occurs not just within close relationships where such evaluations may be targeted towards a specific other, but may also
extend to their evaluations of others whom they only see peripherally or incidentally. In one recent study by Bargh and colleagues (Bargh, Green, & Fitzsimons, 2008), participants were given the goal to evaluate a videotaped person for what they thought was either a reporter job (one where rudeness and assertiveness is a positive attribute) or a waiter job (where rudeness is a negative attribute). As such, the goal participants were given in advance would favor either rudeness or politeness—treating one as positive and one as negative depending on which job the videotaped interview was presumably for. Partway through the videotaped interview, a “colleague” of the interviewer entered the room and interrupted the interview, doing so either very politely (apologizing profusely) or very rudely (acting annoyed and aggressive). Importantly, although participants initially expected to evaluate the interviewee, they were actually tasked with rating the “colleague” who interrupted—an incidental other who was not the focal target of the participant’s goal. Nevertheless, consistent with the perspective that active goals can affect even one’s evaluations of incidental others, results indicated that participants who had the focal goal of evaluating for the waiter position tended to show less liking for rude interrupter than the polite one; in contrast, participants who had the focal goal of evaluating for the reporter position tended to show less liking for the polite interrupter than the rude one. Subsequent debriefing found that participants were not consciously aware of the influence that their focal goal had on their subsequent, unrelated evaluation, which suggests that active goals may often nonconsciously set people against not just the focal target of their evaluations, but also anyone who enters the pursuer’s field of perception along the way.

Thus, individuals may often nonconsciously devalue relationships and dislike others who do not meet the criteria for their active goals, even if those others are not the focal targets of their evaluations. This might promote interpersonal conflicts in a couple ways: first, individuals may
withdraw from or react with aversion to noninstrumental others, which may in turn elicit more anger and hostility from those others (Leary, et al., 2006). Second, and intriguingly, it also suggests that individuals who are themselves pursuing more socially aggressive goals may actually draw closer to others who possess appropriately aggressive traits—attributes that may be desirable in the moment but may quickly lose their appeal and become toxic to their relationship once their focal goal is satiated and they are now entangled with this aggressive other (Bargh, et al., 2008; Forster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005). Indeed, past work on “fatal attractions” has shown that the very features that initially draw individuals towards others can often be the same features that end up fomenting relationship conflict and negativity later on (Felmlee, 1995).

Goal-dependent evaluations, then, may nonconsciously polarize individuals and set them against others by either pushing them away from those who are not useful in the moment, or drawing them towards those who are useful in the moment but may be difficult to put up with later on.

**Goal-Biased Inferences**

The broad influence of active goals—such as their tendency to distort and bias social perception—can affect not just individuals’ evaluations of others, but also how those individuals interpret the actions of others. Indeed, perceivers tend to rather automatically assume that the actions of others operate in service of some corresponding goal (Hassin, et al., 2005), meaning that they infer goals in others automatically and based on whatever behavioral cues are readily perceptible. However, individuals typically rely on very little information to make their automatic inferences (Winter & Uleman, 1984)—not only are social situations often highly ambiguous, but perceivers’ own active goals and chronic motives tend to influence what behavioral cues they are sensitive to and what goals they most likely to “see” in others. As perhaps best described by Kelly (1955), perceivers’ own motivational orientations (e.g.,
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aggressiveness versus gentleness) seem to operate as personal scanning patterns projected onto the environment in order to detect blips of meaning. For example, chronically aggressive individuals tend to rather automatically interpret the actions of others in more aggressive terms, something not observed among nonaggressive individuals (Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 2006). Relatedly, activating a self-protection goal led one sample of White study participants to report “seeing” greater anger in the photographed faces of Black men—more anger than they reported seeing in the photographed faces of White men (or women of any race, Maner et al., 2005). This suggests that individuals’ own active goals nonconsciously influence how much aggression and hostility they infer in others.

The tendency for individuals to project their own motivations onto the environment also extends to goals that are activated nonconsciously. In a study by Kawada and colleagues (Kawada, et al., 2004), participants were first primed either with a nonconscious goal to compete with others or with no goal in particular. Participants then read a fictional scenario in which two men were about to engage in a prisoner’s dilemma game in which cooperation by both parties would yield mildly positive outcomes for both men, but competition by one of them would yield greater gains for him at the expense of his partner. Although participants were not given any concrete cues regarding how the two men would behave, it was made clear that if either partner decided to play this game aggressively, he would handily beat his partner in terms of total gains. To assess the kind of inference participants made as a function of their nonconscious goal priming condition, participants were instructed to guess how aggressively they thought the men would play. Results indicated that participants primed with a nonconscious goal to compete guessed that the two men would play more aggressively against each other than participants not
primed with a goal, suggesting that their own nonconscious competitiveness goal had biased them to infer greater competitiveness in others.

It may also be the case that individuals’ goal-tinged evaluations of others interact with their goal-biased inferences, resulting in perceptions of others that are both negatively tinged and hostily interpreted. For instance, individuals’ own motivational orientations can interact in important ways to influence the kinds of motivations brought to mind by others. In one recent study (Brazy, Shah, & Devine, 2005), White participants initially completed an implicit measure of their own chronic prevention and promotion motivational orientations, and also a measure of their prejudicial attitudes towards Blacks. Participants were then subliminally primed with concept words relating to African-Americans, during which their response latencies to motivational words linked to either promotion (e.g., lazy, outgoing) or prevention (e.g., threatening, considerate) were assessed. The researchers found that highly prejudiced participants who possessed strong promotion-related motivational orientations demonstrated greater cognitive accessibility of the stereotyped promotion-related words (e.g., lazy), and highly prejudiced participants who possessed strong prevention-related motivational orientations demonstrated greater cognitive accessibility of the stereotyped prevention words (e.g., threatening). In effect, these participants’ own motivational orientations interacted with their prejudices to show different types of negatively tinged motivational inferences. This study indicates that individuals’ own motivations may nonconsciously influence both their evaluations and inferences to be more negative and hostile.

In this section we reviewed two routes through which goals can nonconsciously set people against others: by devaluing them due to their lack of goal-instrumentality or by nonconsciously projecting their own goals onto them. Thus, even at the earliest moment of
exposure to certain others, individuals may already be evaluating them negatively or perceiving them as potential threats, obstacles, or competitors to goal pursuit. Importantly, these initial and immediate impressions of others might inform the perceivers’ later behavior; if those initial impressions are aversive or hostile, then the perceivers may react by taking on oppositional goals or pursue their goals more aggressively in those situations. Whereas this section was about the ways in which active goals might nonconsciously influence social perception, we now move on to the ways that individuals react to others and their perceived goals and motives.

Part 2: Counteracting and Contrasting Against Others’ Goals

A growing part of the work on implicit motivational influences has examined how individuals automatically adopt and pursue the goals they perceive in others (Aarts et al., 2004); some goals are even linked in memory to certain relationship partners, such that subliminal exposure to cues reminding individuals of those relationships (e.g., priming concept words related to “father”) can suffice to trigger activation of a goal associated with that relationship (e.g., to achieve academically, Shah, 2003). Indeed, mere exposure to certain cues can nonconsciously trigger the pursuit of goals that others hold for us, that we typically pursue in those others’ company, or even that those others pursue for themselves (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009; Shah, 2003). Moreover, such influences are frequently enhanced when the triggering cue represents a close relationship partner or in-group member, suggesting that implicit motivational influences are felt more strongly when they come from others with whom we may be entangled in other ways (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009; Loersch, Aarts, Payne, & Jefferis, 2008; Shah, 2003). However, not all motivational influences
are desired, and as is often the case, the perceived influence of others and their goals can be experienced as aversive or unwanted, often triggering an implicit reaction against such influence.

This may be especially true in one’s close relationships, where the influence of others may be more frequent, harder to escape, and potentially recurring if the individual allows it to happen (Brehm, 1989). Research on social allergens, for example, has found that individuals’ relationship partners often unintentionally exhibit a range of odious personal habits that grate on the individuals over time and foment increasingly hostile reactions (Cunningham, et al., 1997; Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005). We propose that a similar process may occur for the perceived goals of others: people may automatically react against the goals held or pursued by others when such influences are, in some way, perceived as intrusive, aversive, or unwanted.

The lure exerted by goal-triggering environmental cues can be very difficult to ignore; such cues pull at individuals’ attentional and self-regulatory resources rather automatically (Shah & Kruglanski, 2002). This potentially suggests that, when the motivational influence of another person is perceived as interfering with one’s own pursuits or ongoing sense of self, individuals will feel compelled to react in oppositional ways without knowing why, or that that they are reacting against anything at all. Such reactions against others’ goals could lead people to nonconsciously counteract others by moving to oppose or compete with those others’ goals, or lead people to simply contrast themselves against those others’ goals. Either way, despite the influence of others often only occurring within the individuals’ own minds, they may nevertheless react to such perceived influence by engaging in proverbial battles of will before they or their interaction partners even consciously realize that a conflict of interests exists between them. In the present section, then, we examine how goal counteraction and contrast
might occur nonconsciously in everyday social situations to foment interpersonal conflict and aggression in subtle but important ways.

Counteraction

Sometimes the perceived influence of others’ goals and the potential impact of their pursuits can be regarded as imposing, interfering, or violating individuals’ own self-regulatory priorities. When this occurs, individuals might respond by moving to counteract the impact of the other person’s motivational influence. Such goal counteraction—reacting against the implicit motivational influence of others—has been observed most readily in research in which others’ goals are perceived to interfere with individuals’ fundamental self-related needs—for autonomy and self-directedness, positive self-regard, and optimal distinctiveness (Brehm, 1966; Brewer, 1991; Tesser, 1988). Counteraction might involve adopting an opposing goal—that is, one that is incompatible with the other person’s goal (a motivational “counterforce”, Brehm, 1966) -- in order to supersede the impact of the other person’s influence; however, it may also often involve adopting a very similar goal in order to effectively compete with the offending other.

What is perhaps the best well-known form of counteraction is reactance against the perceived controlling influence of others. Indeed, a long history of psychological research indicates that when individuals feel like their behavioral freedom is being threatened by someone or by some social institution, those individuals will often react by directly opposing the perceived motives of the target other (Brehm, 1966). In recent years, studies have demonstrated that such reactance against the goals held by others might often play out nonconsciously and automatically. In one such study (Chartrand, Dalton, & Fitzsimons, 2007), chronically reactant participants (and their chronically nonreactant counterparts) first provided the names of others who had a goal for them to either work hard or relax. Participants were then subliminally primed
with one of those names (or with a nonsense word in the control condition), after which their performance on an anagram task was assessed. Results indicated that nonreactant individuals primed with the “work hard” significant other performed better on the anagram test than those primed with the “relax” significant other. However, chronically reactant individuals showed the opposite pattern— they performed worse (better) on the anagram task when subliminally primed with the name of someone who wanted them to work hard (relax). This suggests nonconscious reactance against the goals held by others.

Beyond reacting against the goals that others want individuals to pursue, there is also evidence to suggest that reactant individuals will implicitly counteract the goals that others are pursuing for themselves. Although past research suggests that individuals automatically “catch” the goals they see others pursuing (“goal contagion”, Aarts et al., 2004), so too might they counteract the goals they see others pursuing. In a study conducted shortly after the 2005 hurricane Katrina (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2010), participants imagined that their roommate was planning a trip to the Southern Coast and were shown one of two sets of images implying what their friend had packed for it (and, therefore, their goal for the trip). In the “volunteer” goal inference condition, the friend had packed materials implying a goal to work for hurricane relief (images showing work boots, cleaning supplies, etc.), and the other condition the roommate had packed materials suggesting a goal unrelated to work. Similar to results observed by Chartrand et al. (2007), chronically reactant participants were less motivated to volunteer after inferring that their roommate possessed a goal to volunteer, suggesting counteraction against the roommate’s goal.

Other research suggests that, rather than adopting an oppositional motivational state, individuals may move to counteract others by nonconsciously adopting and pursuing a related
goal themselves, which effectively suggests a move to compete with those others. One recent series of studies demonstrated that seeing others engaging in blame attributions in order to protect their self-images often led participants to nonconsciously adopt a similar self-image protection goal and subsequently engage in more blame behaviors themselves (Fast & Tiedens, 2010). This indicates that individuals will often nonconsciously adopt the same goals they see others pursuing in order to counteract those others.

Taken together, the studies described above suggest that mere exposure to others and their goals can elicit counteractive responses. In all these studies, debriefing procedures were used to ensure that participants were not aware of the influence that their exposure to the goals of others had on their own subsequent motivations, supporting the notion that counteraction may occur with little to no conscious intent or awareness, and that people may often set their own goals against the goals of others after merely assuming that those others are acting against their interests in some way.

**Contrast**

Sometimes the impact of others’ goals and motives does not elicit a counteractive reaction so much as a differentiating one. When individuals regard themselves or their values as different from others, they might automatically infer from cues to those others’ goals that they should be doing the opposite. Whereas counteraction implies a motivational counteroffensive, contrast is more about differentiation—distinguishing their own motivational state from a target other that they regard as “unlike” themselves.

The implicit nature of individuals’ tendencies towards contrasting themselves away from “different” others was first demonstrated in Dijksterhuis and colleagues’ work on assimilation and contrast to social stereotypes (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998). In their research, participants were
first primed with either an intellectually stereotyped group ("professors" versus "supermodels") or with an exemplar from one of those intellectually stereotyped groups ("Albert Einstein" versus "Claudia Schiffer"). Participants then completed an intellectual task, and demonstrated opposing effects: Whereas the stereotyped group prime (e.g., "professors") facilitated assimilation to the stereotype (better performance on the intellectual task), the exemplar primes (e.g., "Einstein") facilitated contrast against the stereotype (worse performance on the intellectual task). Similar contrast effects have been observed following subtle exposure to members of out-groups when one’s antagonism towards them is is high (Spears, Gordijn, Dijksterhuis, & Stapel, 2004), against others when one’s motivation to affiliate with them is low (Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005), and against others when one’s competitiveness motivation or control motivation is high (Stapel & Koomen, 2005; Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). As we review in this section, such contrast effects may also apply to the ways that individuals react to others’ goals and motivational states. For instance, individuals will implicitly devalue goals that they regard as being too ordinary or typical to pursue—a direct result of their tendencies to contrast themselves motivationally from others when seeking to differentiate themselves (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2010).

A classic example of motivational contrast involves individuals distancing themselves from goal domains in which they are being outperformed. Although the successes of close others can often be inspiring, so too can they be deflating when they remind individuals of their own shortcomings (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Such influences can lead individuals to adopt contrasting goals and motivational states when in the company of close others who are outperforming them (Tesser, 1988). Recent work has examined the implicit nature of this contrast effect (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2010): Participants in one study first imagined that
they were either being outperformed academically by a friend or not, after which they were led to infer that the friend was either still actively pursuing an achievement goal or not. Those participants who had first imagined being outperformed academically and were then led to infer that their friend was currently in pursuit of an achievement goal subsequently showed reduced salience of an academic achievement goal themselves on a word judgment task, suggesting that they contrasted themselves against the achievement goal of their outperforming friend. Importantly, participants indicated no conscious awareness of how the imagined scenario might have affected their subsequent behavior on the goal salience task, suggesting the implicit nature of their contrast.

Individuals may also contrast themselves against the goals of others when those goals conflict with their own values or chronic tendencies. For instance, Aarts and colleagues demonstrated that exposure to cues suggesting that a target other was in pursuit of a goal to have casual sex actually reduced the desirability of a sex goal in participants who also learned that the target other was in a committed relationship already (and was thus cheating, Aarts et al., 2004). In another study involving subliminal priming, we assessed participants’ history of marijuana use and also obtained the first names of relationship partners who they assumed intended to either use marijuana or not in the upcoming month. Participants were then subliminally primed with one of those two names (the pro-drug tempter or someone else), after which they were given a drug prevention manual to read and the amount of time they spent reading it was recorded. Interestingly, those participants who tended to abstain from marijuana use who were subliminally primed with the name of a pro-drug tempter spent relatively more time reading the drug prevention manual (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009), suggesting implicit contrast against the tempter’s goal to use drugs.
Sometimes individuals may contrast themselves against others simply because they see those others as unmotivated towards a goal to which they are themselves highly committed. In one recent set of experiments examining the impact that others’ indifference has on individuals’ own motivation and behavior (Leander & Shah, 2010), participants were either subliminally primed with images of others expressing apathy and a lack of motivation towards academic achievement or primed with other images before they worked on an anagram task assessing their own pursuit of academic achievement. Prior to this, however, half the participants in each subliminal priming condition were primed in advance with a nonconscious achievement goal, with the other half not primed with any goal. The results that followed support nonconscious motivational contrast: Participants who had been primed in advance with a nonconscious achievement goal subsequently demonstrated heightened anagram task performance when primed with the indifference of others. That is, individuals with an activated achievement goal contrasted against the absence of motivation they saw in others by working harder towards their nonconsciously held academic achievement goal.

Individuals might also contrast against the goals of interaction partners whose nonverbal mannerisms subtly indicate social asynchrony. Recent work on behavioral mimicry has found that individuals tend to assimilate to the goals perceived to be held by those who mimic them, but they might ignore or even contrast against the goals of those who do not mimic them. In two recent studies (Leander & Chartrand, 2010), participants who indicated high sensitivity to behavioral cues to others’ internal states—a form of empathy—showed a significant loss of achievement motivation themselves when interacting with a confederate who expressed high achievement motivation over the course of the interaction but did not mimic them. Importantly, participants indicated no conscious awareness of the confederate’s nonverbal behavior or how it
might have influenced them, suggesting that individuals who are highly sensitive to behavioral cues to others’ internal states might use such cues to determine whether to assimilate to or contrast against those others’ goals. This suggests that the subtlest behavioral cues may nonconsciously trigger contrast against the goals assumed to be held by an interaction partner, even at zero acquaintance with that person.

It may also be that individuals nonconsciously assimilate to others’ goals in order to contrast against broader social institutions—assimilating to a friend’s goal in order to rebel against a broader societal law or norm. As discussed earlier, many individuals can be implicitly tempted to indulge in illegal substances (Leander, Shah, & Chartrand, 2009), but recent studies go as far as to suggest that reactance motivation—which is usually associated with reacting against the goals of others—can actually facilitate assimilation to others’ pursuit of such things as underage alcohol consumption (Leander, Shah, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2010). Thus, even when individuals are not contrasting against the goals of others, they may often assimilate to others in order to contrast against broader social influences, which may foment other forms of conflict that extend beyond the immediate interpersonal situation.

Whether by counteracting the impositions of others’ goals or by contrasting against dissimilar or disliked others, individuals readily and nonconsciously adopt and pursue goals that go against the perceived will and preferences of those around them. Importantly, such goal conflict between individuals may be a basic source of relationship strife and dissatisfaction—history is certainly rife with examples of how competing or incompatible goals can preclude the opportunity to establish functional relationships. What’s interesting about the studies presented above is that these conflicts of interest occur not just nonconsciously but also wholly within the minds of study participants who are simply being presented with social cues in a laboratory.
setting. This suggests that individuals are quite susceptible to cues that trigger their own oppositional tendencies, cues that lead them to spontaneously react against and oppose the perceived goals of others before they or any potential interaction partner is consciously aware that such a conflict exists.

Part 3: Goal-Directed Aggression

In the previous sections we considered ways in which interpersonal conflict and aggression may stem from responding or reacting against others and their goals. Yet to be examined, however, is how active goals might foment aggressive behavior on their own, over the natural course of their pursuit. Given the relatively reflexive nature and uncontrollability of nonconscious goals, they may not be as burdened by the rules of polite society in the same way that consciously held goals are. In this third and final section, then, we examine evidence suggesting that dispositional and situational factors might often lead individuals to nonconsciously pursue their goals with greater impunity and heightened behavioral aggression. Examples of this from past work have considered how individuals’ own chronic predispositions might lead them to nonconsciously pursue their goals with greater aggression when the situation warrants. Children with more aggressive tendencies, for instance, rather automatically generate more aggression solutions to social problems as compared to children with less aggressive tendencies (Bloomquist, August, Cohen, Doyle, & Everhart, 1997), suggesting an implicit tendency towards aggression in pursuing their social goals.

Research on nonconsciously cued social power also supports the notion that individuals with certain chronic tendencies may automatically respond to such cues by pursuing their goals
in more aggressive or self-centered ways. For instance, participants in one study who had a relatively strong exchange orientation to their social relationships (tit-for-tat, as opposed to a more communal orientation) who were nonconsciously primed with social power subsequently behaved more selfishly on a task sharing exercise by overloading their partner with the more onerous tasks and assigning the easier tasks to themselves (S. Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). The effects of priming social power can also nonconsciously enhance the pursuit of sex goals among men with high power-sex associations in memory and among men with stronger predispositions towards sexual harassment (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). Thus, situational cues that implicitly invoke concepts of social power can often enhance individuals’ own behaviorally aggressive tendencies.

   Recent work suggests that failing at a nonconscious goal may also instigate socially aggressive behavior. Psychology has long acknowledged that failing at a goal can sometimes trigger more hostile and aggressive responses in individuals (Berkowitz, 1989; Dill & Anderson, 1995), and one recent series of studies demonstrates that such aggression can occur among individuals who fail at nonconscious goals (Jefferis & Chartrand, 2010). In these studies, participants were first primed with an impression formation goal and then led to fail at that goal prior to completing various tasks meant to assess their subsequent aggressiveness. In one of these studies, participants who were led to fail at their nonconsciously activated impression-formation goal subsequently poured more hot sauce into a container that was going to be consumed by someone whom they knew hated spicy foods.

   Thus, individuals’ chronic tendencies and goal outcomes may nonconsciously influence the aggressiveness of their social behaviors, suggesting that goals may often instigate conflicts and interpersonal aggression on their own and over the natural course of their pursuit.
Conclusion

In this work we examined three broad ways in which goals can nonconsciously foment interpersonal conflict and aggression: First, active goals can shape social perceptions in ways that promote devaluing of relationships and set individuals against others whom they assume are potential competitors for their goals. Second, individuals might often counteract or contrast themselves against others’ goals, either in reaction to the perceived imposition of others’ influence or to simply differentiate themselves from those others. Third, nonconscious goals may often employ socially aggressive behavioral strategies in order to facilitate goal pursuit or cope with a failed pursuit. Evidence from these three routes suggests that interpersonal conflict and aggression may often be inherent in the pursuit of goals and be a contributor to the goals that individuals take on, value, and oppose. Given that many of these influences are occurring entirely within the minds of the individuals themselves, their “reactions” to the perceived affronts of others may actually be what initiates conflict in an interaction or relationship. Indeed, in the research we examined, it was always the participants’ own goals, needs, and chronic tendencies that shaped their perceptions and reactions to others. This potentially suggests that it is through their own subsequent behavior that they elicit the very kinds of hostility that they automatically expected from their interaction partners, effectively reinforcing their initial reactions (M. Chen & Bargh, 1997).

One may generally conclude that individuals are most likely to oppose or aggress against others’ goals and preferences when their own needs not being met. Some goals that individuals bring into a situation are inherently aggressive (see Parts 1 and 3), and some people inherently
elicit motivationally aggressive reactions (Part 2). However, such reactions do not necessarily imply a failed interaction. Whether or not activated goals—even competitive or aggressive ones—interfere with one’s relationships likely depends on how those goals interact with the goals of one’s interaction partner. In any social situation—be it a competitive sport or communal get-together—both interaction partners bring with them certain goals and expectations that, if met, could result in an overall positive experience for that interaction. If both interaction partners want and expect competition, then some level of opposition and aggression will only facilitate the interaction and thus enable the goal’s pursuit (to compete you have to have someone to compete with). We suggest that interaction partners likely begin to perceive aggression and interpersonal conflict when there is a mismatch of goals and expectations, such as when one person wishes to be competitive and the other does not—or even when one person wants to pursue (or is overzealously pursuing) an affiliative goal (e.g., helping, romance) that the other does not want to be a part of. Indeed, the motivational fit between two individuals may determine how oppositional and aggressive behaviors are subjectively experienced.

Given that the present chapter focused on interpersonal conflict and aggression, it may be easy to conclude that goals operate with a high degree of impunity, if not disdain, for others’ needs. This may certainly be true in many cases, but a wealth of evidence also suggests that goals often operate to nonconsciously reduce and minimize such conflicts. The most powerful example of this stems from research on the nonconscious pursuit of prosocial goals: Whereas possessing strong prejudicial attitudes can enhance stereotyped motivational attributions, so too does possessing chronic egalitarian goals help automatically inhibit stereotype activation (Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999). Furthermore, whereas exchange-oriented individuals who are primed with power may behave more selfishly, communally-oriented
individuals primed with power behave more responsibly (S. Chen et al., 2001). Even when in competition with an interaction partner, individuals who are concurrently pursuing a prosocial goal will often nonconsciously scale back their own efforts when outperforming their competitor (Bargh & Gollwitzer, 1994). Furthermore, research on nonverbal behavior has found a wealth of evidence suggesting that subtle cues in the form of behavioral mimicry readily elicit assimilation to an interaction partner’s goals and values (Leander & Chartrand, 2010; Leander, Chartrand, & Wood, 2010; Maddux, Mullen, & Galinsky, 2008). Therefore, despite the many ways in which goals facilitate conflict and aggression in relationships, so too might individuals nonconsciously move to maintain a relative sense of peace and harmony in order to protect their relationships.

It is important that we also note that many socially aggressive goals are dependent on others and cannot be effectively pursued in those others’ absence (competition, rebellion, sexuality, etc., Baron & Boudreau, 1987). Despite the potential problems of goal influences on social inferences and reactions, individuals may often be compelled to perceive others as competitors or as viable targets to react against in order to satiate their chronic and recurring needs. After all, rebels need a social institution to rebel against, and partisan politicians need opponents to decry, for adopting opposing goals may represent the pursuit of their own unconscious goal to rebel. Thus, active goals might often need to nonconsciously manufacture interpersonal conflicts (be they real or imagined) to facilitate their own attainment. The very act of aggressing against others and reacting against their goals, then, may have its own functional qualities that have not yet been fully considered.
References


