The relationship of value orientations, self-control, frequency of school–leisure conflicts, and life-balance in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this self-report study is to analyze proposed interrelations between value orientations, self-control, frequency of school–leisure conflicts, and life-balance in adolescence. Life-balance is defined as satisfying time investment in different life areas. The tested model posits that self-control is negatively related to conflict frequency and that the latter is negatively related to life-balance. Achievement and well-being value orientations, in turn, should be connected to the degree of self-control and the frequency of goal conflicts. In the study, 817 German 8th-graders with a mean age of 13.4 years participated. Results from structural equation modeling supported the proposed model. The results suggest that fostering self-control can be a promising approach to decrease the frequency of goal conflicts, and thus increase students' experience of life-balance.

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1. Conceptual framework

Lack of time seems to be an important issue, especially in Western societies: "Time has become the most precious commodity and the ultimate scarcity" (Robinson & Godbey, 1997, p. 25). Balancing time adequately can be seen as an essential feature of general satisfaction. Studies about life-balance have focused mostly on adults (e.g., Gröpel & Kuhl, 2006) while there is a gap in research among adolescents. As a major task of today's students is to arrange school and leisure activities, adolescents experience a lack of time and a need to balance their lives. This study focuses on the question whether self-control as well as achievement and well-being value orientations are connected to the frequency of school–leisure conflicts, and life-balance among students.

1.1. Life-balance

One aspect of balancing life is that a person allocates time across various life areas or roles in a satisfying way (Senécal, Vallerand, & Guay, 2001). Time-conflicts occur as a result of over- or under-allocation of time to a particular domain. Analyses of time-use data identified school and leisure as two central contexts of adolescents' lives (Larson & Verma, 1999). Seen from a life-balance perspective it is crucial whether students believe to be investing the right amount of time into each of these activities. If one area claims more resources,

students cannot spend time on other life areas which are also important to them (Ratelle, Vallerand, Senécal, & Provencher, 2005).

Life-balance is seen as an essential feature affecting well-being. A number of negative consequences of work–family conflicts have been identified, for example, emotional exhaustion (Senécal et al., 2001) and decreased well-being (Noor, 2004). Especially for adolescents, interactions with people and settings in their daily lives are seen as crucial for well-being and health (Call et al., 2002). Therefore, in this developmental period the appropriate allocation of time is especially important. Conflicts in school- and leisure-related activities seem to hamper optimal learning and personality development of students (Ratelle et al., 2005). Due to time restrictions, conflicts between different goals can trigger the feeling that time cannot be allocated properly to important life areas, which leads to the experience of an unbalanced life.

Thus, it is central for research to identify determinants of life-balance. This study deals with three proximal determinants of life-balance: frequency of school–leisure conflicts, self-control ability, and individual value orientations. The selection, optimization, and compensation model (SOC-model, Baltes, 1997) offers a heuristic framework to examine how people cope with scarcity of time and energy. Selection is important whenever resources are limited and a person has to decide which goal to strive for. Optimization follows in the form of enhancing and allocating resources to achieve a selected goal. Compensation becomes necessary when a person is confronted with loss of resources. Persons applying these regulatory processes display higher subjective well-being and positive emotions (Freund & Baltes, 1998). Adolescents pursue a great range of activities, interests, and duties. In a given situation, they have to select specific goals. If different goals come into conflict and pursuing one goal causes

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opportunity costs because other goals cannot be strived for within available time, this can endanger life-balance and put well-being at risk.

1.2. Goal conflicts in adolescents

Today's adolescents frequently have several obligations a day, for example, doing schoolwork, attending ballet training, and thereby performing multiple roles (Luthar, 2003). Time spent on one area competes with time spent on other life contexts (Alsaker & Flammer, 1999). Studies suggest a trade-off, for instance, between playing music and watching television, between leisure and study time (Motl, McAuley, Birnbaum, & Lytle, 2006). School–leisure, school–school, and even leisure–leisure conflicts are reported to occur quite often (Fries, Schmid, Dietz, & Hofer, 2005). Several studies suggested negative effects of school–leisure conflicts on the extracurricular time invest-ment in homework (Hofer et al., 2007), on learning results (Fries & Dietz, 2007), life-satisfaction, and depression (Ratelle et al., 2005). Hence, a harmonious negotiation of various life-domains seems to be important (Ratelle et al., 2005).

In terms of the SOC-Model, adolescents have to select goals based on what they value highly and what they might be able to achieve by taking into account their abilities (Baltes, 1997). The expectancy-value model (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) allows a closer look at selection because it frames investment in achievement tasks as a decision between different options. In case of equal expectancies, a person decides for the alternative with higher task values. Due to resource limitations, goal conflicts can be conceptualized as situations in which multiple goals cannot be managed in a satisfactory way. In the present study, we postulate that a successful management of available resources in order to achieve multiple goals one after the other requires a high level of self-control. This creates conditions for an efficient goal management that in turn contributes to a positive life-balance.

1.3. Self-control

With many goals to be pursued, self-control abilities are regarded as helpful to avoid goal conflicts and to enable a satisfying time allocation. The experience of imbalance in time allocation to different life areas is seen as resulting from failure in self-control because students are not successful in adequately allocating their resources to reach their goals. Duckworth and Seligman (2006) define self-control as "the ability to suppress prepotent responses in the service of a higher goal" (p. 199). Self-controlled persons achieve better results in various life areas, for example, impulse control, adjustment, interpersonal relationships, but also in task performance (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Positive relationships between self-control and school performance have been found in several studies (e.g., Bertrams & Dickhäuser, 2009; Wolters, 1999). These results suggest that self-control is important to regulate one's behavior, affect, and attention. From a personality view, Tangney et al. (2004) state that "a high personal capacity for self-control should be powerfully adaptive and should enable individuals to live happier, healthier lives" (p. 272). Although the construct of self-control offers a promising link to life-balance, only little research in adult samples has been directed toward this issue (Gröpel & Kuhl, 2006). Also in adolescence, self-control is likely to support goal conflict resolution, and thereby improve life-balance.

1.4. Value orientations

Value orientations are relevant because adolescents' individual value preferences may be related to the valences they ascribe to school and leisure goals (Fries, Schmid, & Hofer, 2007). An individual value is defined as a desirable transsituational goal of varying importance that serves as a guiding principle in people' lives (Schwartz, 1992). Compared to attitudes, values are more abstract

because attitudes focus on specific objects or events (Fries et al., 2007). Contradictory to motives, values are supposed to be conscious (Biernat, 1989) and may serve as an evaluative instance (Feather, 1995). Within our theoretical framework, value orientations influence the valence an individual attributes to a given option. Although values do not explicitly refer to specific behaviors, they have motivational power. On a tangible level of action alternatives, values refer to single actions and are likely to come into conflict (Fries et al., 2005). We argue that the most general construct of value orientations is related to goals and to the choice of specific activities affecting life-balance. We expect that students' value orientations are related to the constructs of self-control, frequency of goal conflicts, and, in turn, to life-balance.

For "achievement" value orientation, we adapted Inglehart's (1997) "modern" dimension to students highly valuing academic effort and success. Conversely, "well-being" value orientation, modeled on Inglehart's "postmodern" dimension, refers to a student's preference for leisure. These value orientations are viewed as constructs that are especially relevant for school–leisure conflicts (Hofer, Schmid, Fries, Zivkovic, & Dietz, 2009) and for the guidance of adolescents (Hagström & Gamberale, 1995).

We expect students high in achievement value orientation to possess high degrees of self-control; the reverse is expected for students' well-being value orientation. Achievement values are supposed to be linked to school-related activities that are usually performed for their positive future results rather than for immediate need satisfaction. As schoolwork is regularly not regarded as being fun and pleasant, a high level of self-control competencies is necessary to reach this long-term goal (Mischel & Ayduk, 2002). This is usually not necessary for well-being oriented activities, which are performed for their immediate positive appeal. Practicing self-control can increase self-regulatory strength (Gailliot, Plant, Butz, & Baumeister, 2007), thus we conclude that this competence is strengthened by a repeated practice of self-controlled behavior, as a result of appreciating achievement values. There is evidence that value orientations influence behavior (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003), but although values are regarded as relatively stable, they may be subject to change over time (Rokeach, 1973). In early adolescence when values are still in a formative stage, they may also change as a result of experienced discrepancies and dissatisfaction with one's own values (Rokeach, 1973). Therefore we postulate reciprocal relationships between self-control and value orientations.

The preference for well-being values in adolescents should be related to the frequency of goal conflicts and, in consequence, to the experience of a less balanced life. This is because students feel that their time investment does not adequately reflect their inclinations and duties. With regard to achievement-oriented values, no predic-tion was made. On the one hand, students valuing academic success could experience more conflicts and feel less balanced. They may find it difficult to cope with high demands of school and extracurricular duties, and to coordinate them with leisure activities (Luthar, 2003). In school-based studies, high demands at school were negatively related to health (Gådin & Hammarström, 2000) and quality of school-life (Karatzias, Power, Flemming, Lennan, & Swanson, 2002). On the other hand, these students are expected to be capable of successfully organizing their different duties, interests, and tasks; and therefore to be less prone to experience conflicting situations.

The foregoing arguments result in a model relating life-balance to students' value orientations, self-control, and frequency of goal conflicts (Fig. 1).

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

Participants consisted of 817 students (51.8% female) from 10 schools and 35 classrooms in Germany. Their mean age was 13.4 years