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Modeling the effects of within-person characteristic and goal-level attributes on personal project pursuit over time ☆

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to overcome methodological constraints of previous goal pursuit research by exploring how people simultaneously rely upon person-level characteristic adaptations and unique goal-level attributes to pursue their personal projects. Undergraduate participants identified 10 projects they would pursue over an academic quarter and rated project meaningfulness, effort exerted, patience employed, and progress satisfaction at five time points. Multilevel structural equation models revealed the relative influence of person-level and project-level attributes on project appraisals. Person-level adaptations accounted for a large portion of variance in project pursuit appraisals, though significant project-specific trends were found over time as well, including mutual positive cross-lag influences between meaning, patience, and effort, and a negative predictive effect of progress satisfaction on meaning.

1. Introduction

During the last half-century, psychological research has demonstrated that personal goals are at least as important as traits in the analysis of personality and well-being (cf. Cantor, 1990; Emmons, 1999; Little, 1983). Most integrative personality theories (i.e., McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008) include contextualized, middle-level units of personality called characteristic adaptations, which encompass a person's goals. Characteristic adaptations highlight the "doing" side of personality as opposed to the "having" side of personality and help to provide the rationale that underlies a person's typical behavior (Cantor, 1990). Research shows that people's goals have significant effects on both their hedonic well-being—helping or hindering attempts to maximize pleasure and minimize pain—and on their eudaimonic well-being—helping or hindering effective functioning in the midst of current life circumstances (Emmons, 1999; Romero, Villar, Luengo, & Gomez-Fraguela, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Despite the recognition of goals as important units of personality, very little research exists that explains the behavioral mechanisms underlying goal pursuit. In particular, no studies have assessed to what extent people employ common characteristic approaches in pursuing all of their goals, and to what extent they pursue each goal with a unique approach. To illustrate, consider an entrepreneur starting a small business whose goals revolve around growing the business and turning a profit. Goal research to date could help to explain whether she is likely to be successful in achieving her goals as well as the general effects of her goal pursuits on well-being. However, the current literature could do very little to reveal how the characteristic ways she pursues goals relate to the specific way she will pursue an individual goal over time, or how her effort exerted on a goal will affect that goal's meaningfulness at a later point in time. For example, will she use the same pursuit strategies for her professional goals as her interpersonal, health, or spiritual goals? Will all her effort invested in a project make it more meaningful for her? Clearly, more work is needed in order to address these gaps in the research and to better understand the multi-level dynamics of goal pursuit over time.

Though many researchers have studied various types and facets of goals, the work of Little (1983) has been especially influential in understanding the mechanisms underlying goal pursuit. Little coined the term *personal projects* to describe the manner by which people pursue their goals through "a set of interrelated acts extending over time, which is intended to maintain or attain a state of affairs foreseen by the individual" (1983, p. 276). Along with his colleagues, he developed and implemented a system for measuring personal projects and related outcomes, which he called the Personal Projects Analysis (PPA; Palys & Little, 1983). In this

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method, participants are provided the definition of a personal project, as well as several examples, and are asked to list ten personal projects that are currently of interest in their own lives. The ideographic nature of this process ensures that the projects listed by participants are substantially salient and readily evaluable on various project dimensions. Next, participants are asked to appraise their project pursuits by answering a series of questions specific to each project. These questions are related to the outcome variables that the researchers wish to study, which often include the importance of the project to the participant and the participant's evaluation of time or effort spent in pursuit of the project.[1]

1.1. Goals as multilevel and dynamic constructs

Little employed cross-sectional methodology in his first studies evaluating the effects of personal projects on subjective well-being (SWB), but he noted that, due to the dynamic and complex nature of personal projects, a better understanding of this relationship could only be obtained through longitudinal research (Palys & Little, 1983). Moreover, the methodology inherent to the traditional PPA requires researchers to examine individual projects, instead of people, as the primary unit of analysis. Thus, most studies create person-level scores by aggregating appraisals across goals. However, goals are multilevel constructs, and research is needed determine to "what extent goal appraisals are characteristics of an individual and to what extent they vary across his or her various goals" (Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Aunola, 2009, p. 498). Until recently, these limitations were accepted as inevitable due to the unavailability of statistical methods capable of tracking the dynamics of nested data across time. However, recent advancements in statistical analysis now allow us to overcome these limitations in order to examine personal projects in new, more complex ways.

1.1.1. Advances in examining goals as nested variables

Multilevel modeling (MLM) is a useful analytic approach in this endeavor because it allows researchers to examine goals nested within the person, explaining both person-level and goal-level variables. Nurmi et al. (2009) used MLM to study the ways in which people evaluate all of their personal projects similarly, and to what extent their goal appraisals vary uniquely by goal. They found that goal appraisals mostly differ depending on the goal, but there are significant measurable effects of person-level factors on goal appraisal across a person's goals. Because their study examined cross-sectional data, they were unable to speak to the dynamics of goal pursuit across time. For instance, they could not address how goal appraisal profiles change over time, or how stable the influence of person-level factors is across time. Goal researchers have long been interest the process of goal *pursuit*, so including a longitudinal aspect to multilevel goal analysis is an important next step towards fully testing goal theories.

1.1.2. Objective 1

Thus, the first objective of the present study is to shed further light on the nested and dynamic nature of goal-pursuit. Specifically, we resolved to determine the influence of people's stable, characteristic approaches for goal appraisal and pursuit on the ways they typically pursue their personal projects, versus the influence of goal-specific factors, which are likely to vary over time and with respect to specific goals. To accomplish this objective, we utilized new statistical advances in multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) to examine the dynamics of pursuing goals, which are nested within persons across time. In concordance with the findings of Nurmi et al. (2009) and the proposed nested and dynamic nature of goal pursuit, we developed several hypotheses. First, in light of the fact that goals are nested within persons, we hypothesized that (*H1a*) people's appraisals of their personal projects at any given time point would be influenced not just by project-specific factors but also by person-level factors. In addition, we proposed that (*H1b*) person-level influences on project appraisal could be predicted by stable, person-level characteristic approaches to goal appraisal and pursuit that are consistent across time and across a person's projects.[2]

1.2. Personal project pursuit as a means for facilitating eudaimonic and hedonic well-being

Understanding how the dimensions of goal pursuit affect well-being has long been a central focus for motivational researchers. Generally, this research has differentiated between the effects of goal pursuit on eudaimonic well-being versus hedonic well-being. Research on associations between goal pursuit and eudaimonic well-being has offered that various elements of the process of goal pursuit contribute to life meaning, character development, and one's sense of efficacy over life's circumstances (Emmons, 1999). On the other hand, research has also shown the effects of personal project pursuit on hedonic outcome variables, including SWB and life satisfaction (Little, 1983).[3] Indeed, hedonic conceptualizations of well-being include the notion that life satisfaction and SWB arise from making progress on personally meaningful goals (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Wiese, 2007). There is already a well-established body of research evaluating outcomes of personal project pursuit on well-being, but with the exception of several notable studies (e.g., McGregor & Little, 1998; Schnitker, 2012), very little research has examined how elements of goal pursuit associated with eudaimonic and hedonic well-being interact with each other in the process of personal project pursuit.

Thus, a second objective of the current study is to examine the ways that elements of personal project pursuit associated with eudaimonic and hedonic well-being interact in the course of personal project pursuit over time. Although a great number of goal pursuit variables are related to well-being, we have identified several variables associated with eudaimonic well-being (i.e., meaning, the virtue of patience), one associated with hedonic well-being (i.e., project progress satisfaction), and one that bridges the two (i.e., effort) as a demonstration of how goal appraisals related to well-being dynamically interact across time. Of note, these goal pursuit variables are not necessarily well-being outcomes or indicators in their own right; instead, we identify them as attributes of goal pursuit processes relevant to eudaimonic and hedonic well-being.

1.2.1. Meaning

McGregor and Little (1998) theorized that the extent to which a person's projects align with his or her personal identity and values substantially affects personal project pursuit. Ryff and Singer (1998) called such projects *meaningful activities* and postulated

[1] Participants may also evaluate their projects on a "cross-impact matrix," which details whether each project facilitates, conflicts with, or is unrelated to each of the other projects.

[2] Though *H1a* and *H1b* may appear similar at first, they differ on a subtle but important distinction. *H1a* suggests that both person-level and project-level factors influence measured project appraisals *at a single time point*, thus establishing that project appraisals are meaningfully nested within persons. In contrast, *H1b* proposes the existence of latent person-level attributes that influence personal project appraisal *across time*, thus lending insights to how stable person-level factors influence the dynamic nature of goal pursuit. Drawing a proper distinction between these two hypotheses is essential for correct application of the MSEM analyses upon which the current study relies.

[3] See Ryan and Deci (2001), for a more complete explanation of the distinctions between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being.

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