



Measuring assimilative and accommodative resources in young adults: Development and initial validation of suitable scales [☆]



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ABSTRACT

New scales measuring assimilation and accommodation (cf. the dual-process framework) were developed for use with young adults. Experts reviewed 41 items which were then administered to 235 young adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 22$; 72% female). Exploratory factor analyses reduced these to two 10-item scales, which demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha > .90$). Confirmatory factor analysis using a second sample ($N = 236$, $M_{\text{age}} = 22$; 77% female) confirmed the proposed structure. Construct validity was supported by finding correlations in the expected directions with measures of goal engagement, disengagement, re-engagement, and life satisfaction. The new scales will allow assimilative and accommodative resources to be assessed in young people.

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1. Introduction

The dual-process framework (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002) has advanced our understanding of how people regulate their behaviour. According to this model, people monitor their behaviour and reduce discrepancies between their current and desired state by employing either assimilative or accommodative self-regulatory resources. These resources are considered somewhat trait-like, meaning that individuals are likely to preference one or the other; however, their use often varies depending on environmental demands and constraints. Existing measures of assimilation and accommodation were developed and validated for adults (Bailly, Joulain, Hervé, & Alaphilippe, 2011; Heyl, Wahl, & Mollenkopf, 2007), and have poor reliability and validity (Henselmans et al., 2011; Mueller & Kim, 2004). Despite this, there have been no attempts to develop more psychometrically sound measures. In addition, the role that assimilation and accommodation plays in young adults is under-researched as there are no appropriate scales for this population. We developed and validated new assimilation and accommodation scales suitable for young adults.

1.1. Assimilation

Assimilation is used when individuals focus on achieving a particular goal. In this mode, people attempt to modify their environment so it is congruent with their aspirations and sense of self (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). They engage in proactive, intentional behaviours, aimed at achieving their desired state. Information that is not relevant to the current goal, and which suggests that the goal might be difficult to attain, is inhibited. Conversely, information that will assist the person in attaining their goal becomes salient. People link achieving the goal with positive outcomes and a sense of meaning (e.g., “If I work hard, I will get the job I want.”), which increases their striving motivation, and their action resources (e.g., self-efficacy, perceptions of control) are directed towards modifying their environment to facilitate goal attainment (Leipold & Greve, 2009). This mode is adaptive as it ensures that individuals maintain focus and motivation when actively pursuing a desired outcome (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Frazier, Newman, & Jaccard, 2007).

1.2. Accommodation

Accommodation, which is also adaptive, refers to the process of modifying one's goals to match one's current situation or environmental constraints (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). It too is aimed at reducing the discrepancy between actual and desired (goal) states, but does so by downgrading or revising the desired state to be closer to the actual one. Accommodation is activated when efforts towards attaining a goal have proven futile and action

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resources are becoming depleted. This mode widens the person's scope of awareness and redirects their attention towards alternative goals (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). Information supporting the person's decision to give up or revise a goal comes to the fore, and cognitions that link the person's actual state with positive outcomes (e.g., "I'm proud of getting where I am in my career") are generated. In addition, unattainable goals are re-appraised and often downgraded or abandoned, while the attractiveness of alternative goals increases. This process often results in goal revision or goal re-engagement (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

Being somewhat trait-like, assimilation and accommodation are employed by people of all ages (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). However, age-based differences in the frequency of application have been suggested. Young people are generally thought to be more oriented towards assimilation as they have more resources (e.g., social support, physical strength, good health, time), and are, thus, more likely to perceive that they can attain their goals; older people are more likely to use accommodation strategies, as, for example, their time horizon is more limited (Brandtstädter, 1999).

1.3. Measuring assimilation and accommodation

Currently, assimilation and accommodation are assessed using the 15-item Tenacious Goal Pursuit (TGP) and the 15-item Flexible Goal Adjustment (FGA) scales, which were developed in German and translated into English by the scale developers (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Two recent studies were critical of their psychometric properties. Support was not found for the 2-factor solution (the negatively and positively worded items loaded onto separate factors; Henselmans et al., 2011; Mueller & Kim, 2004), no association was found with age, as predicted by the dual-process framework (Mueller & Kim, 2004), and there is little support for content (i.e., when using expert raters) and construct validity (Henselmans et al., 2011). These authors concluded that the two scales do not differentiate between the two constructs, and recommended devising new scales.

Bailly, Hervé, Joulain, and Alaphilippe (2012) administered French translations of the TGP and FGA scales to 677 older adults (63–97 years), but again failed to find a 2-factor solution. After removing 5 low-loading items from each scale, they found two 10-item factors consistent with Brandtstädter and Renner's (1990) factors. However, the internal reliabilities of these shortened scales were modest ($\alpha = .78$ and $.76$) and FGA was not correlated with age as predicted. An additional limitation was the sample used, which limits these revised scales to use with elderly adults.

1.4. Present study

Given these criticisms of existing scales, the aim of the current study was to develop and validate new scales to measure assimilation and accommodation. As the dual-process framework has implications for young people, who are expected to use more assimilation than accommodation strategies, we aimed to develop scales that were suitable for young adults, to allow the dual-process framework to be tested on this age group.

To provide evidence for construct validity of the new scales, we included measures of goal revision (engagement, disengagement, re-engagement) and well-being, which are drawn from the nomological net of these constructs. Assimilation is related to goal engagement, and accommodation is related to goal disengagement and re-engagement from goal-setting theory (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Carver & Scheier, 1998). We used career goals as the context, as career development is an important developmental task in young adulthood (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008). In

addition, we included a measure of life satisfaction, which was used previously to validate the TGP and FGA scales (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990).

2. Item generation and content validity

2.1. Phase 1 – content validity of TGP and FGA scales

Seven scale development experts rated the 30 TGP and FGA items. Eight TGP items (47%) were rated by >80% of experts as assessing the incorrect construct (i.e., accommodation instead of assimilation), and two more items were considered to be poor measures of assimilation. Three FGA items (20%) were rated as assessing the incorrect construct (i.e., assimilation not accommodation), and three were considered to be poor measures of accommodation. Thus, the majority of TGP items and almost half of the FGA items showed poor content validity. This adds to the previous research (Henselmans et al., 2011; Mueller & Kim, 2004), which raised issues regarding construct validity. We then selected the five most highly rated TGP and nine most highly rated FGA items to inform the development of new items in Phase 2.

2.2. Phase 2 – new item generation

We followed procedures recommended by Hinkin, Tracey, and Enz (1997) to generate and validate 20 new assimilation and 21 new accommodation items, which we based on the original descriptions of the constructs (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). As our target was to develop final scales with approximately 10 items in each, 41 initial questions were considered sufficient (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). Only a few negative items were included, as both Henselmans et al. (2011) and Mueller and Kim (2004) identified artifactual responding to negative items in the original scales and Barnette (2000) recommended that it is "best that all items be positively or directly worded and not mixed with negatively worded items" (p. 364).

Assimilation items were designed to assess the domains of modifying one's internal and external environment and tenacious adherence to previously set goals. Accommodation items were designed to assess modifying or downgrading goals to match personal and external environmental constraints and flexible adjustment of previously set goals (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). We assessed emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of these domains. Finally, based on recommendations by Henselmans et al. (2011), we used item stems of: "In general, when I have to do something that's really important to me, and it's really difficult, I usually..." (assimilation), and: "In general, when it turns out that I cannot do something that's really important to me, I usually..." (accommodation). The stems were designed to cue participants to consider their typical behaviour when responding.

Six experts rated how well the new items measured the intended constructs. Based on this, 3 assimilation items were removed and 8 were modified slightly; 3 accommodation items were removed and 10 were modified. This process left 35 items (17 assimilation and 18 accommodation). Last, six young adults (66% female, mean age = 24 years) reviewed the 35 items, which led to minor alterations to 9 items.

3. Factor analysis and construct validity

3.1. Participants and procedure

The study was approved by the authors' university ethics committee. The sample was recruited by advertising the study on

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