Why do people set more self-concordant goals in need satisfying domains? Testing authenticity as a mediator ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that people set and pursue more self-concordant goals in domains where they experience the satisfaction of psychological needs (Milyavskaya, Nadolny, & Koestner, 2014). However, the mechanism for this has not been investigated. The present study proposes that authenticity experienced in a domain mediates the relationship between domain need satisfaction and goal self-concordance. Using multilevel structural equation modeling, we investigate two components of authenticity and find that only authentic behaviour, but not authentic awareness, relates to goal self-concordance and acts as a mediator. We also test an alternative model, ruling out the possibility that need satisfaction is influenced by authenticity.

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1. Introduction

People's feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and motivations differ across contexts. Indeed, it is not surprising when we hear of a person who is caring with her family, but ruthless in getting ahead at work. Although there are a variety of reasons why such disparity could exist, one explanation may be that the person is genuinely caring but pressured to act competitively at work, while alternatively such a behaviour may reflect the person's competitive nature. The extent to which a person is aware of and can act in line with their true nature is called authenticity. The ability to act in ways that are perceived as authentic in a given area of one's life likely depends on the psychological support and constraints afforded by the domains in which the person is engaged. Such authenticity, or lack thereof, may in turn be the driving force behind contextual differences in people's behaviours. In the present study, we investigate this proposed process, examining whether psychological experiences in a given domain impact authenticity, which

in turn explains contextual differences in the types of goals that people pursue.

Previous research has repeatedly shown that pursuing a goal concordant with one's ideals, values, and interests (termed self-concordant) is an important predictor of goal attainment and of well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Goal self-concordance is typically defined and operationalized as the extent to which a goal fits with the person's underlying values, feelings, interests, and desires, *relative* to being set and pursued for external reasons, such as to please others or to gain rewards, or because of feelings of obligation, shame or guilt. Given the positive consequences of setting self-concordant goals (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), it is important to understand *why* some goals that people set are more self-concordant than others. However, only one paper has examined this question, focusing on the role of the domains in which these goals are set (Milyavskaya et al., 2014).

One critical feature of domains, defined as "distinct spheres of human activity" (Emmons, 1995), is the amount of psychological need satisfaction experienced in them. As conceptualised by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), psychological needs are essential nutrients required for psychological growth and well-being that can be present or absent in any given environment based both on the actions of the social agents with whom the person interacts and on the person's perception of his or her surroundings. These needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to experiencing choice and

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volition in behaviour. Competence involves experiencing mastery and the ability to effectively navigate and manage one's environment. Relatedness is feeling close and connected to other people with whom one interacts in that domain. For example, a strict, controlling boss who yells at his employees would result in a workplace where the employees' needs are thwarted. Conversely, perceiving a coach as understanding, providing choice and rationale would likely lead an athlete to experience need satisfaction in the sport domain.

Research has shown that the amount of autonomy, competence and relatedness experienced in any given domain contributes both to increased well-being and to motivation for continuing to engage in further activities in that domain (Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011). For example, experiencing need satisfaction has been linked to greater vitality and lower exhaustion and burnout in sports (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008), persistence in school (Ratelle, Larose, Guay, & Senécal, 2005), job performance (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004), and relationship satisfaction (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007), among others. While the three needs are sometimes examined separately, they are all considered essential, with research showing that they exert similar effects on basic outcomes (e.g. Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Because of these similar effects and typically high correlations among the needs, most researchers combine the three needs to form an index of need satisfaction (see Milyavskaya et al., 2014, pg. 708–709 for a further discussion on why including the three needs separately in a regression is problematic); we follow this convention in the present study.

Need satisfaction within domains also affects the goals that a person sets and pursues in that domain (Milyavskaya et al., 2014). In three studies, Milyavskaya and colleagues investigated differences in goals pursued in domains where the needs are either thwarted or satisfied. They found that goals are both perceived as more self-concordant in need satisfying domains, and that more self-concordant goals are selected for pursuit. In their introduction, Milyavskaya and colleagues (2014) discuss likely reasons why need satisfying domains would be conducive to the pursuit of self-concordant goals. Specifically, they suggest that in need-satisfying domains people may be able to "act more in line with their underlying values and beliefs", and that in non-satisfying domains people may lack self-knowledge or have inaccurate self-knowledge (Milyavskaya et al., 2014, pg. 3). However, these hypothesised pathways are not actually operationalized or tested. A closer look at these proposed mechanisms shows that both acting in line with underlying values and possessing adequate self-knowledge are two facets of authenticity.

Authenticity refers to the extent to which people's actions and understanding is reflective of their "true self" (for a description of the concept of true self, see Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, and King (2009), Schlegel, Hicks, King, and Arndt (2011)). Previous research and theorising has connected authenticity with people's self-understanding, the extent to which their actions are expressions of underlying values and chosen volitionally, and the willingness and ability to accurately view the core of the self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Although authenticity is often examined as a trait measure, people's functioning can be more or less authentic on a day-to-day basis (Heppner et al., 2008), suggesting that particular experiences and situations can play a role in authentic functioning. According to SDT, authentic functioning is particularly likely to occur in situations where supports for autonomy, competence and relatedness are in place (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similarly, the idea that the true self can be expressed around close others who are unconditionally supportive has been used in previous research to distinguish the 'true self' from the 'actual self' (i.e. those aspects of the self that the person expresses to others at any given moment; Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002)). In turn,

research has shown that validation of one's true self, including feeling like one's true self is accepted by others, leads to lower defensiveness (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). Consequently, in domains where support for the three needs is available, people should be able to express their true self to a greater extent, and act in a more open, non-defensive way. We expect that this includes choosing and pursuing goals that are more in line with that true self – i.e., that are self-concordant. We thus expect that feelings of authenticity will mediate the link between psychological need satisfaction and adopting self-concordant goals. For example, if in her work Julie feels competent, that she is provided with meaningful choices (autonomy), and that her colleagues and supervisors respect and accept her (relatedness), she will feel and act more authentically in that setting, and will be able to set and pursue goals that are in line with her true self, instead of blindly pursuing goals simply to please her supervisors.

Although authenticity is often described as a unitary construct, researchers (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) have argued that it is composed of four distinct components: awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation. While these four components of authenticity have been shown to be related to a number of positive outcomes (see Kernis and Goldman (2006), for a review), we are especially interested in two of them: authentic behaviour and authentic awareness. *Awareness* refers to the ability to understand one's true self, including "one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions." (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, pg. 294). Authentic *behaviour* consists of the ability to behave in accordance with one's preferences, values and needs.

Our reasons for focusing on authentic awareness and behaviour stem from their relevance to the goal setting phases described in many established theories of goal pursuit. For example, in the action phases theory (Gollwitzer, 1990), authentic awareness would be especially relevant in selecting goals, since knowing or understanding oneself would dictate the types of goals that a person would select. Similarly, authentic behaviour would be especially relevant in the planning and enacting phases, when it is the ability to act in a certain way that would regulate the outcome of these phases. Since goal setting is primarily a matter of choosing goals and planning goal pursuit (comprising Gollwitzer's first two stages), authentic awareness and behaviour should be most relevant. These two components of authenticity (awareness and behaviour) are also the ones that were specifically mentioned as potential mechanisms by Milyavskaya and colleagues (2014). In the present study, we actually test these two aspects of authenticity as mediators, hypothesising that the ability to understand one's true self in a given domain, and the ability to behave in a free and authentic manner accounted for the effects of need satisfaction on setting and pursuing self-concordant goals. Given that need satisfying settings encourage the free development and expression of one's true self (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we expected that people would report higher authenticity in domains where they experience the satisfaction of their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Feelings of authenticity should in turn translate into setting and pursuing goals that are authentic, or self-concordant.

Although these three concepts (need satisfaction, especially of the need for autonomy, authenticity, and self-concordance) may seem very similar at first glance, they are conceptually quite different. Need satisfaction represents a good fit between the person and the environment, and can be thought of as an environmental or contextual characteristic (how well the environment satisfies the three needs). Authenticity is an internal characteristic of the person, representing an internal psychological state. Finally, goal self-concordance represents a behavioural outcome, whether the goal(s) that a person generates and decides to pursue represent a high or low degree of fit with the 'self'. In our model, both authentic