



Personality traits and the prediction of personal goals

Z Reisz, Michael J. Boudreaux, Daniel J. Ozer*

University of California, Riverside, United States

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ABSTRACT

Trait and motive concepts are widely used in the description and analysis of individual differences in personality, but relatively little work has examined how these personality units relate to one another. In the present research, we report relations between self-generated, idiographic goals and the Big Five personality trait dimensions. Undergraduate participants ($N = 1443$) each listed 10 personal goals and completed a measure of the Big Five. Results from multiple logistic regression demonstrated that traits were associated with 52 of 96 goal categories. Two prominent themes emerged: Goals that if attained would *compensate* for perceived deficits associated with personality traits (e.g., be less shy and low Extraversion) and goals that *complement* trait characteristics (e.g., travel to Europe and high Openness to Experience). Observed relations are discussed in terms of goals to alter one's perceived personality traits or facilitate long-term and not easily attained outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Much of contemporary motivational research emphasizes the forward looking, self-constructive aspects of personality in terms of goals and future intentions. Explicit motives, including life tasks, personal projects, and personal strivings, represent what individuals desire or are trying to accomplish in their lives (Little, 1999). The trait approach, in comparison, emphasizes the consistent, patterned ways in which people think, feel, and behave. Both trait and motive concepts have long been recognized as important for understanding individual differences in personality, but relatively little work has examined how they relate to one another. One difficulty in assessing this relation is the lack of a widely agreed upon, multi-tiered taxonomy for organizing goal content across different levels of specificity. In this paper, we describe one such taxonomy for categorizing the goals of college students, and address whether variation in goal content is predictable from individual differences in personality traits.

The predominant approach for studying relations between personality traits and goal content is to present a standard list of normative goals to participants and ask them to rate how important each goal is to them (e.g., Bleidorn et al., 2010; Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Husemann, 2009; Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004; Roberts & Robins, 2000). For example, in an initial study, Roberts and Robins (2000) developed a taxonomy of major life goals based on fundamental values (e.g., economic, aesthetic, social) and asked

respondents to rate the importance of each of the 38 life goals. High Extraversion and low Agreeableness were the two most common traits associated with life goals, but categorized them according to different theoretical perspectives. Bleidorn et al. organized goal content around Bakan's (1966) notions of Agency and Communion. Agency goals (those relating to power, achievement and variation) were positively related to Extraversion, Openness, and Conscientiousness and negatively related to Agreeableness, whereas Communion goals (those relating to altruism, affiliation, and intimacy) were positively related to Extraversion, Openness, and Agreeableness. Similarly, Lüdtke et al. examined eight broad domains of life goals (e.g., personal growth, relationships, community) and observed moderate correlations between Extraversion and hedonism, Agreeableness and community, and Openness and personal growth.

Relating personality traits to goal importance ratings illuminates what people value, but may be less revealing of what people actually intend to do. A student might indicate that the goal of becoming a community leader or caring for an aging parent is important when queried, but not pursue or even independently formulate such a goal. Many of the normative major life goals used in the above studies comprise culturally-prominent, value-laden goals. Indeed, several of the associations these studies reported are similar to those observed between traits and values (Haslam,

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, United States. Tel.: +1 951 827 5211; fax: +1 951 827 3985.

E-mail address: daniel.ozero@ucr.edu (D.J. Ozer).

Whelan, & Bastian, 2009; Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008). For example, a similar positive relation was observed between Extraversion and the importance of hedonistic life goals (Lüdtke et al., 2009; Roberts & Robins, 2000) and Extraversion and endorsing hedonism as a value (Haslam et al., 2009). Rating a goal as important, we believe, is different from proactively choosing and pursuing that goal.

A second but less commonly used approach for assessing trait-goal relations is to ask respondents to generate their own list of current goals and have independent judges code them into goal content categories. This approach may be more likely to identify goals that are actively and presently being pursued. In one study, Salmela-Aro et al. (2012) asked nearly 1300 twins to list four of their personal projects and then classified these goals into one of 16 content categories. Big Five trait dimensions were associated with the presence of goals in 6 (Education, Own family, Friends, Property, Travel, and Self) of the 16 project categories. Self-related goals (e.g., “grow as a person”) showed the strongest relation with personality traits, including Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience.

The Salmela-Aro et al. (2012) results suggest intriguing trait-goal relations. But goal content is typically more narrowly focused on particular end states bound to roles, norms, and contexts. Students do not set “Education” goals, but rather aim to pass a mid-term or get into graduate school. The broad life domains in which goals are typically organized are not homogenous entities. Although very useful as a starting place for classifying goals, analyzing goal content at the broadest level of abstraction may be insufficient for identifying personality-relevant information. We therefore set out to test whether a more detailed and specific goal classification scheme would further clarify patterns of relations between the content of individuals’ self-generated goals and personality traits.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 1443 undergraduate students (64% female) enrolled at a public university in Southern California who were recruited from the psychology department subject pool. Average age was 19 years ($SD = 1.88$; range = 18–46); 45% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 24% were Hispanic, 15% were White, 7% were African American, 3% were Middle Eastern or Indian, and 6% were mixed, other, or had missing data.

2.2. Measures

The analyses to be reported utilize data collected in multiple studies extending over a 9-year period. In all studies, participants completed a variety of questionnaires in small groups of 10 or less, with sessions lasting no longer than one hour. The subset of measures common across studies and reported here are the personal goal elicitation task and the Big Five Inventory.

2.2.1. Personal goals

Participants were instructed to list 10 personal goals. They were told that the researchers were interested in people’s motives, goals, intentions, wishes, and desires. They were asked to think about the goals that are currently important to them and how they planned to attain these goals. We provided examples from a hypothetical middle-aged male to clarify the task.

2.2.2. Goal content taxonomy

Participants’ goals were categorized using a hierarchical content taxonomy (see Table 1). The taxonomy was structured around

eight broad content domains for classifying the goals of college students (Kaiser & Ozer, 1997). The current taxonomy contains 96 categories organized hierarchically in three tiers. Tier 1 is composed of eight broad content domains: Academic/Occupational, Social Relationships, Financial Concerns, Health and Fitness, Organization, Affect Control, Independence, and Moral or Religious. Also included is an “other” category for goals that failed to fit in any of the other eight. Tier 2 is composed of subdomains nested within the Tier 1 domains. Examples include “perform well at school or a job,” “peer relations,” and “improve immediate financial situation.” Tier 3 further refines Tier 2 categories into more specific goal categories, such as “study harder,” “maintain or improve friendships,” and “budget better.” One Tier 3 category was further refined to produce a fourth tier.

The taxonomy was developed to categorize goal content with minimal loss of the original information provided by respondents. Categories were created through an iterative process of goal collection and category discernment, except for Tier 1. The content domains comprising the first tier were described by Kaiser and Ozer (1997) and content ratings that paralleled these categories provided the basis for their cluster analysis of participants’ goals. Further subcategories were developed successively over time to provide ever more narrow categories in which to code goals. There are clearly population specific categories that would not be pertinent for non-student groups, and perhaps there are important gaps in coverage that would be revealed through the analysis of goals obtained from other populations. Such specificity is inevitable given the contextualized nature of goal units.

A team of independent judges classified each goal using the goal taxonomy. Judges were instructed to place each goal in a single category at the lowest tier possible while maintaining an accurate description of goal content. A participant’s goal was content-coded when two of three judges agreed on its assignment. When this criterion was not achieved, a fourth judge was added. If consensus (two judge agreement) still could not be reached, the goals were classified in an informal discussion among the authors and research assistants. For the vast majority of goals, judges were able to agree on a category that represented the content of the original goal. Of 14,430 goals, only 131 (i.e., less than 1%) of them could not be unambiguously coded. These were therefore coded as “other.”

2.2.3. Big Five Inventory

The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) is a 44-item measure designed to assess the Big Five personality trait dimensions. Research has shown this scale to possess convergent and discriminant validity with respect to other Big Five instruments (John et al., 2008). The alpha coefficients for the five scales were as follows: Extraversion (.87), Agreeableness (.75), Conscientiousness (.77), Neuroticism (.78), Openness to Experience (.75).

3. Results

Initial analyses tabulated, for each participant, the number of goals in each of the eight broad content areas. The regression of each of these eight counts on the five personality traits made clear that traits are relatively unrelated to broadly classified goal choices. Of the 40 possible relations (eight regression models, each with five trait predictors) only three reached significance. The largest relationship was observed between Neuroticism and Affect Control goals, $\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$. But people do not really pursue goals at the level of abstraction used in these analyses. People want to make new friends or find a romantic partner, not attain social goals – the psychologist’s reconstruction of such endeavors.

In order to analyze more specific goal content, 96 dichotomous goal content variables were created based on the judge codes, such

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