



Personality traits and the prediction of personal goals

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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.

Bleidorn et al. (2010) and Lüdtke et al. (2009) also assessed participants' importance of major 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,

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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

Table 1
Multiple logistic regression results: Big Five traits predicting goal presence.

Freq.	β_0	β_E	β_A	β_C	β_N	β_O	Code	Goal category
152	-2.16						1	Academic or Occupational
726	0.01						1.1	Perform well at school or job
151	-2.16				-0.20		1.11	Improve work-related skills/knowledge
320	-1.26						1.12	Study harder
231	-1.67					-0.17	1.13	Meet minimal performance standard
82	-2.83						1.2	Complete specific (short-term) tasks (e.g., "finish paper")
85	-2.83	-0.26				0.33	1.3	Make progress on long-term plans
45	-3.54						1.31	Transfer to other campus
202	-1.84			0.18			1.32	Pursue advanced degree
375	-1.07			0.18	-0.15	-0.17	1.33	Graduate/complete education
108	-2.54						1.4	Plan academic/occupational future
307	-1.34	0.14		0.23			1.5	Achieve meaningful career goal
131	-2.36	-0.30					2	Social Relationships
89	-2.77	0.24					2.1	Family of origin concerns
901	0.51		0.18		0.20	-0.14	2.11	Maintain/improve relations with family and/or specific family members
89	-2.78						2.12	Assist family member(s)
81	-2.87			-0.32			2.2	Peer relations
238	-1.65	-0.22		-0.23			2.21	Make new friends
669	-0.15						2.22	Maintain/improve friendships
13	-4.91					0.63	2.23	Assist friend(s)
33	-3.80						2.3	Romantic relations
132	-2.32						2.31	Find a romantic partner
316	-1.32	0.30		0.27	0.21	-0.14	2.32	Maintain/improve romantic relationship
4	-6.00						2.33	End a romantic relationship
5	-5.76						2.34	Assist romantic partner
29	-4.09			0.48	0.56		2.4	Family of destination concerns
89	-2.73						2.41	Create family of destination
36	-3.75						2.411	Get married
16	-4.72				-0.56		2.412	Have children
26	-4.26					-0.52	2.42	Maintain/improve relations with family and/or specific family members
2	-7.48						2.43	Assist family member(s)
181	-1.97	0.18				-0.21	2.5	Participate in larger social community
71	-2.98						2.6	Be respected or well-known/leadership
262	-1.57		-0.35		0.16	0.18	2.7	Alter a social personality trait to get along better with others
125	-2.66	-0.82	0.23			-0.22	2.71	Be less shy, more talkative
44	-3.57		-0.38				2.72	Control temper/anger
41	-3.59						3	Financial Concerns
59	-3.18						3.1	Improve immediate financial situation
241	-1.61						3.11	Budget better
72	-3.01	0.31					3.12	Increase income
430	-0.86	-0.13					3.13	Find or improve job/short-term employment
49	-3.49						3.2	Improve longer-term financial situation
211	-1.79	0.22				-0.20	3.21	Save money
73	-2.95						3.22	Pursue lucrative career
68	-3.02						3.3	Financially assist family of origin
4	-6.08						3.4	Financially assist family of destination
5	-6.31					-0.98	3.41	Be able to support future family
2	-7.00						3.5	Financially assist friend, acquaintance, or community
261	-1.53				-0.17		3.6	Afford to purchase a desired item for self
24	-4.11						4	Health
418	-0.90				0.14	0.13	4.1	Maintain/improve health, appearance, or hygiene
288	-1.43	0.20		-0.25	0.16	-0.21	4.11	Lose weight
467	-0.75				-0.23		4.12	Get in shape/exercise
181	-1.96						4.13	Better diet
147	-2.22			-0.22		-0.25	4.14	Improve sleep schedule
61	-3.16						4.2	Reduce consumption of drugs/alcohol/tobacco
19	-4.55		0.53		0.52		4.3	Manage specific and/or chronic health problem
35	-3.87	0.37		-0.48			5	Organization
197	-1.86						5.1	Activity control (start, stop, or complete an activity)
177	-2.03	0.21		-0.27		0.20	5.11	Clean-up/get organized
37	-3.69						5.12	Be punctual
282	-1.44			-0.26			5.2	Use time more effectively (includes "stop procrastinating")
25	-4.09						5.3	Attain a performance standard in life task
57	-3.21						6	Affect Control
256	-1.54					0.15	6.1	Increase positive affect (pursue pleasure, have fun)
230	-1.74	-0.19		-0.21	-0.21	0.39	6.11	Participation or improvement in recreation, fine arts, hobbies
149	-2.19				-0.19		6.12	Play a sport or improve sports ability
172	-2.03					0.23	6.13	Travel
5	-6.24						6.14	Thrill-seeking
182	-1.98	-0.23				0.27	6.15	Learn new skill/gain knowledge for personal satisfaction
83	-3.07				0.67	0.43	6.2	Decrease negative affect
261	-1.61			0.33	0.51	-0.18	6.21	Reduce stress
30	-3.96			0.45			6.22	Relax
33	-4.01				0.76		6.23	Not worry so much

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Freq.	β_0	β_E	β_A	β_C	β_N	β_O	Code	Goal category
32	-3.92	0.40					6.3	Feel better about self
40	-3.71					0.48	7	Independence
79	-2.89					0.26	7.1	Be self-sufficient
50	-3.35						7.11	Live independently from parents
29	-3.98						7.12	Do things for oneself
25	-4.08						7.13	Improve/maintain an independence related skill
21	-4.23						7.14	Obtain material goods/wealth needed for independence
53	-3.34		0.35				7.2	Minimize influence of others
177	-2.12	-0.49	0.33		0.24	0.19	7.21	Be more assertive, self confident
42	-3.54						7.3	Find direction in life
4	-6.21						8	Moral or Religious
58	-3.24		-0.27				8.1	Moral
120	-2.46		-0.30				8.11	Attain a virtue: courage, honesty, dutifulness, not be selfish, dedication to ideals, better "character"
109	-2.51						8.12	Do good for the community
7	-5.66						8.13	Attain a minimal moral standard
102	-2.62		-0.26				8.2	Religious
51	-3.34						8.21	Observe tenets of an organized religion
264	-1.50						8.22	Maintain or strengthen religious beliefs and/or faith
46	-3.48						8.23	Experience spiritual growth
131	-2.31						9	Other
36	-3.85				-0.63		9.1	Meta-goals (goals to set or achieve goals, content-free achievement goals)
61	-3.21					0.33	9.2	Acculturation/Language

Note: Total $N = 1443$; Freq. = number of people reporting a goal in each category; β_0 , β_E , β_A , β_C , β_N , and β_O are the intercept and coefficients for the five traits, respectively; Code = position of the category within the taxonomy. The goal category provides the normative goal content that closest fits the idiographic goals reported by participants. All regression models include all five traits, but only significant correlations (i.e., $p < 0.05$) are displayed; bolded coefficients are significant at $p < 0.01$.

that each participant was scored as either possessing or lacking a goal in each category. If a participant provided 10 goals of heterogeneous content, they would have a profile indicating the presence of a goal in 10 categories, and the absence of a goal in 86 categories. We used multiple logistic regression models to evaluate personality traits' ability to predict individual differences in goal choice. In these analyses, traits were predictors of the dichotomous outcome variable, goal presence/absence, for each of the 96 goal taxonomy categories.

One or more of the Big Five traits were associated with 52 of the 96 goal content categories and each trait was related to multiple goals: Openness was associated with the most goal categories and Agreeableness the fewest. Trait-goal relations were more likely to be identified in categories where goal prevalence was neither very small nor very large (the correlation between the absolute value of the intercept and presence of a significant trait relation was -0.30), reflecting the difficulty of predicting variations in outcomes with extreme base rates.

Table 1 shows the multiple logistic regression coefficients for predicting the presence of each of the 96 goal content categories; non-significant coefficients ($p > 0.05$) are not displayed. The results in Table 1 are organized by the hierarchical goal taxonomy previously discussed. Each goal category has been assigned a numeric code corresponding to its position in the taxonomy, and this code serves to organize the results reported in Table 1. When specific goal categories are discussed, below, their numeric code is reported as a reference to Table 1.

The first column in Table 1 displays the number of people who listed a goal in each category of the taxonomy. The two most common goal types listed were: "Maintain or improve relations with family of origin and/or specific family members (2.11)" ($N = 901$), and "Perform well at school or job (1.1)" ($N = 726$). The two least common goals were: "Assist family member(s) (2.43)" ($N = 2$), and "Financially assist friend, acquaintance, or community (3.5)" ($N = 2$). These frequencies reflect the highly varied nature of goal pursuits despite the strong presence of goals related to participants' roles as young adult college students. Only 31 participants (2.15%) did not report at least one goal within the Academic/

Occupational category, and only 43 (2.98%) did not report at least one social goal.

Multiple logistic regression models were used to predict the presence of a goal in each taxonomy category using standardized trait scores. The logistic regression coefficients show trait-goal relations as a change in the log odds of goal presence per standard deviation difference in trait standing. The intercept is the log odds of goal presence at the mean of all five traits, and is thus the log odds of the base rate of the goal category's presence in this sample. These coefficients are comparable in meaning across goals and traits. For example, in Table 1 the coefficient for Neuroticism is .52 for the category "Manage specific and/or chronic health problem (4.3)" and .51 for predicting the category "Reduce stress (6.21)," indicating nearly equivalent effects of Neuroticism on the log odds of goal presence. For those who prefer a different scale, these logits may be converted to changes in odds ratios or probabilities per standard deviation difference in trait standing (e.g., see Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

In reviewing the results displayed in Table 1, several thematically coherent trait-goal relationships appeared. Higher scores on Agreeableness were associated with goals relating to minimizing the influence of others. Low Agreeableness, and only low Agreeableness was associated with goals in the "Moral and Religious (8.0)" domain. Lower scores on Conscientiousness were associated with organization goals, while higher scores were associated with academic or occupational goals. High Neuroticism was associated with affect control goals, specifically goals to reduce negative affect. Openness was consistently associated with goals related to increasing positive affect.

4. Discussion

Though relations between personality traits and the presence of personal goals categorized broadly were few and weak, the use of more specific content categories led to the identification of more numerous and somewhat stronger relations. Although even the largest relations were of but moderate size, the continuous effects of selecting, working toward, and revising personal goals are likely

Table 2
Examples of trait–compensatory and trait–complementary goal relations.

Compensatory		Complementary	
Trait	Goal category	Trait	Goal category
E (–)	Be less shy, more talkative	E (+)	Feel better about self
E (–)	Make new friends	A (+)	Maintain/improve relations with family of origin and/or specific family member(s)
A (–)	Control temper or anger	C (+)	Achieve meaningful career goal
A (–)	Alter a social personality trait to get along better with others	C (+)	Pursue advanced degree
A (+)	Be more assertive, self confident	C (+)	Graduate/complete education
A (+)	Minimize influence of others	C (+)	Family of destination concerns
C (–)	Use time more effectively (includes “stop procrastinating”)	O (+)	Learn new skill or gain knowledge for personal satisfaction
C (–)	Clean-up/get organized	O (+)	Travel
N (+)	Not worry so much	O (+)	Participation/improvement in recreation, fine arts, or hobbies
N (+)	Decrease negative affect	O (+)	Increase positive affect (pursue pleasure, have fun)

Note: E = Extraversion; A = Agreeableness; C = Conscientiousness; N = Neuroticism; O = Openness. The direction of association is provided in parentheses.

to cumulate over time (Abelson, 1985) to produce meaningful outcomes. The use of more specific trait measures, such as Big Five facet scales, might reveal stronger effects. Two patterns emerged in these data that characterize trait–goal relations: Goals may be set to *compensate* for perceived deficits associated with a personality trait; and goals may be set to *complement* or express desires that are consistent with trait characteristics.

When an individual’s trait standing leads to negative affect or creates problems, a motive to compensate and alter trait characteristics might arise. This trait–compensatory relationship is especially apparent in the goal correlates of Extraversion and Neuroticism (see Table 2). The strongest correlates of goals associated with low Extraversion were those that appear to “undo” the implications of introversion, such as be less shy, more talkative, more assertive, and self-confident. Those scoring low in Extraversion were also more likely to report goals to make new friends. These goals may arise from introverted students’ difficulties in developing and participating in the kinds of social networks that most college students desire. The strongest correlates of goals associated with Neuroticism were those aimed at regulating negative emotional states, such as not worry so much, reduce stress, and decrease negative affect.

However, not all goals are set to compensate for difficulties associated with one’s personality traits. Other goals appear to be directed at behaviors that are complementary to traits (McGregor, McAdams, & Little, 2006). Trait–complementary relationships appeared when outcomes associated with the trait require sustained planning and effort, and are not easily or simply attained. These relations are prevalent among the correlates of Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience. People high in Conscientiousness were more likely to set achievement-related goals, such as to achieve a meaningful career outcome, to graduate, and to pursue an advanced degree. The kinds of positive life outcomes associated with Conscientiousness (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006) require planning and sustained effort, and the goals associated with this trait would seem a necessary part of the process. Retaining and referencing goals, such as getting an advanced degree, may be fundamental to the process of attaining such outcomes.

Openness to experience includes imaginativeness, aesthetic sensitivity, preference for variety, and intellectual curiosity. These attributes are clearly expressed in the goals that are more likely to be reported by those high in Openness, such as the desire to participate or improve in a fine art or hobby, to learn a new skill, to gain knowledge for personal satisfaction, or to travel. Goals in each of these categories are directed at the expression of imagination, curiosity, intellectual and aesthetic interests, and creativity, all appearing to complement the propensities associated with Openness. Similar to the outcomes associated with Conscientiousness, these goals are long-term, involve sustained effort, and are not readily attainable.

In both instances of trait–compensatory and trait–complementary relations, the desired outcomes appear to be those that are not easily or readily attainable. Trait–compensatory relations focus on outcomes that will undo or rectify unwanted characteristics, such as being shy, neurotic, hostile, or disagreeable. Similarly, trait–complementary relations focus on desired outcomes that are also not easy to attain, such as graduating college, achieving a career goal, or traveling and learning a new skill. When desired outcomes are more easily attainable, goals may in fact not be formulated. People high in Extraversion and Agreeableness, for example, may make new friends easily and effortlessly, and so do not set goals of this kind despite rating relationship goals as important (e.g., Roberts & Robins, 2000; but see McGregor et al., 2006 on how such trait complementary social goals may be important for well-being).

Both the specific findings and the more general conclusions offered here must be tempered with the recognition that this study relied entirely on self-reports of an ethnically diverse sample of college students. The goal taxonomy was developed using college students, and would have certainly developed differently had working adults, retirees, or young children been included. Goals are at least in part derived from normative role demands. The most apparent impact of the sample’s ethnic variation is manifest in their report of acculturation goals. The goal content of college students may be similar to that of other populations, but college is a specific and unique setting. College students are likely to have goals unique to this context, and unlike those from an unselected heterogeneous adult population. Future work with other populations will determine where changes and additions are required if the goal taxonomy is to be made applicable to a broader population.

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