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# **Personal Projects, Affect, and Need Satisfaction**

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated effects that patterns of purposeful human action, conceived as personal projects, have on positive and negative affect and need satisfaction. Replication was attempted of main effects reported in the literature for project attributes upon affective experience. More importantly, a more complex view of the effects of projects attributes was proposed whereby project attributes interact with each other and age and sex to influence affect. In addition, an investigation into the determinants of need satisfaction was conducted utilising both within- and between-subjects modes of analysis.

Seventy respondents completed a questionnaire containing measures of positive and negative affect, a project elicitation list, and measures of the project attributes of need satisfaction, involvement, conflict, and time-frame. Regression analyses generally failed to replicate reported relationships between project attributes and positive or negative affect. In contrast, a number of significant interaction effects did emerge between project attributes and age and sex, although each of these related only to positive affect. These interactions were between involvement and age, conflict and sex, conflict and age. The determinants of need satisfaction were found to differ greatly in significance but not magnitude, according to the mode of analysis used. Need satisfaction was positively related to involvement, and engagement in long term projects, and negatively to inter-project conflict. In addition to these main effects a hypothesized quadratic effect for project conflict was found and interaction between sex and conflict.

The issues concerning which is the more appropriate level of analysis are discussed. It was concluded for the interaction analyses that, while project attributes may be considered as independent influences upon positive affect, they should not be considered independently of age and sex. It is concluded that projects did not adequately match expectations of relating to affect and need satisfaction and are limited in their seeming inability to account for negative affect.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PERSONAL PROJECT

This thesis represents an investigation into the consequences of people's patterns of purposeful action (characterised by personal projects) for affect and need satisfaction. Previous research in this field is developed by investigating interactive effects of personal project attributes on affect and need satisfaction. In this chapter, the theoretical rationale behind the use of personal projects to structure human experience is presented along with justification for preferring the personal project ahead of other contemporary goal concepts.

#### *An Action-oriented Approach*

Great advances have been made in the field of natural science through conception of the physical world as made up of simple and independent particles of matter involved in blind yet lawful interaction. The promotion of the Cartesian tradition as the ideal and its widespread success in natural science have promoted similar attempts to impose such assumptions onto the study of human behaviour. Skinner, for example has been instrumental in reducing human behaviour to simple patterns of stimulus and response. This stance has been assumed also by many contemporary psychologists such as Holmes and Rahe (1967) who discuss human behaviour as a response subsequent to incoming stimuli. While such attempts have certainly advanced the knowledge and study of human behaviour, these theories are increasingly giving way, or at least being modified, to include within their confines the existence of the thinking mind.

An alternative for the psychologist to formulating the laws of behaviour has been proposed by the likes of Gauld and Shotter (1977). Their suggestion was for psychologists to adopt, what they labelled, a hermeneutical approach, which is one that assumes human behaviour to be purposive and meaningful rather than reactive. The concern, therefore, of psychologists should be with the study of meaningful pieces of human behaviour. And, in fact, a large following of this approach currently exists in

modern-day psychology, apparent from the work of such theorists as Bandura (1986), Frese and Sabini (1985), Mischel (1973), and Pervin (1983),

The units of study advocated specifically by the hermeneutical approach are patterns of human **actions**, or pieces of behaviour which are intentionally carried out, for then it becomes possible to speak of interpretation and the elucidation of meaning. In elucidating the meaning of an individual's actions, we can approach the pattern of action in two ways. We can observe the individual's actions in relation to his or her other actions, pointing to the parameters of the situation and what we believe the motivations of the individual are, and infer the meaning behind them. Or, alternatively, we can ask the individual to provide us with their account of the intentions and desires for which he or she acted. This serves to place their action in the context of the way they perceived the world and their position in it. Optimally, both these strategies would be pursued to provide a full elucidation of meaning.

It is not the intention of the writer to enter into a full-scale argument on the merits of the psychological discipline adopting a hermeneutic approach. However, for the particular study of certain phenomena within psychology, it seems that the hermeneutical approach might be more aptly suited. For instance the present study is considering the possible influences upon an individual's emotional experience. It would seem more appropriate that these influences be framed in the context of how the individual personally structures and experiences his or her life as a whole rather than viewing the individual as simply reacting to the presence or absence of external stimuli.

An ideal compromise between the two approaches to psychology, would surely be the adoption of a strategy which managed to utilise the advantages of both. Such a strategy would maintain the study of meaningful patterns of action as its principal interest, considering the individual to be doing more than just reacting to stimuli, yet could exploit, in its assessment, the methodological advantages apparent in the natural scientific tradition.

An approach which appears to conform adequately with each of these criteria has been

developed by Little (1983). His development of the 'personal project' as a unit for analysis of human experience owes much to the work of Murray (1959) who had suggested the study of individual's serials - long enterprises in which individuals act in accordance with extended plans of action. The lack of an accessible method for measuring serials at the time led to its apparent abandonment. Prompted by the potential of the serial as a unit capable of capturing human experience and equipped with an assessment methodology derivative of personal construct theory, Little theoretically derived his own unit of analysis with accompanying assessment technique.

### *The Personal Project*

The project has been defined by Palys and Little (1983) as "an interrelated sequence of actions intended to achieve some personal goal" (p. 1222). The explicit hermeneutical nature of the project is apparent in this definition with the emphasis firstly, on action, and secondly, on action which achieves meaning from the unifying qualities of a personal goal. Projects are therefore everyday human pursuits ranging from endeavours small and trivial like "cleaning up my room" to the grand enterprises of a lifetime such as "becoming Prime Minister". They can be initiated personally or dictated by others. They may be undertaken solitarily or with the support of others. Projects may be isolated and peripheral aspects of our lives or may be central to our very being.

According to Little, projects develop in four distinct, sequential stages. The first stage is **inception** where individuals become aware of their project, identify it, and make a judgement as to whether to proceed with it. Once individuals have resolved to undertake a project they then proceed to the second stage of **planning**, where they devise the means of carrying out their project. This stage may involve seeking feedback from others on their plan, maybe recruitment of others, checking there are adequate resources and possibly the scheduling of an approach. The third stage is **action** where individuals engage themselves in the project, trying to maintain control and motivation. The final stage is that of **termination**. This stage is usually indicated by some sort of signal that the project is nearing its logical end and due to wind down. If there are no barriers to ending the project then individuals can conclude it.

Any one project by definition must be at one of these four stages although need not progress through all four. For instance, an individual may abandon a project at any of the stages or the project may be of such a nature that it never actually terminates. This stage analysis by Little of the structure of projects reveals the strong potential of projects to tease out the heterogeneities and homogeneities among individuals in the way their lives are structured and experienced. At any of the four stages individuals can differ along such lines as acceptance of the project, their preference of approach, perception of control, perception of progress, motivation to achieve, degree of competency - to name only a few major areas. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine many conventional notions such as locus of control, self-efficacy, or social support as compatible with the project framework as they can all, potentially, be framed in relevance to personal goals.

The four different stages also reflect Little's (1983) claim for the integrative quality of the project in that it allows access to the three aspects of human conduct - cognition, behaviour and affect.

In contrast to more conventional 'reactive' theories which could be characterised at the extreme, for the sake of comparison, by Holmes and Rahe's (1967) life event approach to stress, the project as a unit carries with it certain conceptual advantages.

Firstly, personal projects structure human experience in terms of a unit which is personally relevant to the individual, purposeful, and framed in the context of their own view of the world. Holmes and Rahe, on the other hand, see human experience as a succession of reactions to external events. Subsequently, no allowance is made for what an individual actually chooses to do.

Secondly, projects are temporally extended, placing the individual in the context of time. Behaviour is being regulated by the past from feedback received on project progress so far while the future is important too as projects comprise actions intended to fulfil a future goal. Life events pinpoint the individual in the present or the past only, as reacting to events which are happening or happened.

Holmes and Rahe would hold that simply adding up the total of life events an individual has experienced would be enough to indicate their level of well-being. The properties of the project, in comparison, extend beyond just the unit itself since projects do not exist in isolation. Projects have systemic attributes in that any one individual can be seen to simultaneously have a number of different projects which are inevitably interacting with each other. In a project system, projects may be facilitating each other, hindering each other, overlapping in content, competing for time, or even progressing parallel to each other with no obvious effects. Project systems then, have organisational, structural and dynamic features which, when taken as a whole, are totally unique to each individual.

Not only does an individual possess a project system of his/her own but each individual's project system is inevitably interacting with other people's around them. As Little (1989) expresses it "my trivial pursuits may play havoc with your magnificent obsessions and both may end up missions impossible" (p.9).

#### *Other Goal-related Concepts*

Personal projects are not the only goal-related concepts to have been developed. A healthy literature has accumulated in psychology focusing on the role of individuals' consciously accessible personal goals. Goal concepts other than personal projects which have appeared in the literature are: personal strivings, life tasks, current concerns, and personal plans.

The **personal striving** has been proposed by Emmons (1986) as a unit of analysis which unites goals and actions around a high or superordinate core need. As such, strivings are typically phrased at a higher level of abstraction than projects. A typical striving, according to Emmons (1989), is "trying to appear attractive to the opposite sex" as this is something a person could 'typically be trying to do' which unites various related goals and actions such as "wearing nice clothes", "watching my weight", and "making humorous comments".

The **life task** is claimed by its authors to typically be phrased at a more moderate level

of abstraction and slightly larger than an everyday project (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990), thus organising a wider range of behaviours under a specific domain than do projects. An example of the life task, as provided by them, is "succeeding academically". Life tasks are thought to be most salient to individuals in times of life transition (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990)

**Current concerns**, as proposed by Klinger (1977), refer to the specific goals held by an individual. An example of this construct given by Klinger, Barta and Maxeiner (1981) is "picking up a pair of pants at the cleaners" . This particular concept appears to emphasise action more so than tasks or strivings.

The **personal plan** is defined by Perring, Oatley and Smith (1988) as being an everyday activity designed to achieve a goal. No examples of this construct were provided by its authors but their definition certainly seems very similar in nature to that of the project.

Even though all of these units seem very similar in nature, small differences can be distinguished, at least in terms of stability and abstraction. Emmons (1986) has demonstrated that the personal striving is fairly stable over time (82% of original strivings were re-iterated after a retest interval of one year). In comparison, each of the other goal concepts, by definition, have units which are changing or even disappearing.

Differences in the level of abstraction refer to how far removed from pure activity the unit is and subsequently, the number of sub-goals which are organised underneath . The striving, for example, is claimed by Emmons (1986) to be phrased at a high level of abstraction. It is basically a theme in a person's life such as "trying not to be jealous of others" whereas the project is touted as a more tangible everyday activity like "trying to lose 5 kilograms". Little (1989), himself, believes "projects are middle-level units of analysis hierarchically lodged between overarching values, core concerns, strivings, justifications, reasons or goals, on the one hand, and molecular level acts or operations on the other." (p.8). These claims for divergence have some merit in that a list of subject-generated strivings would likely have a higher level of abstraction *overall* than a list of projects but there seems little doubt that the degree of overlap among all these

concepts is considerable. There certainly is no clear definition of what is **not** a project or what is **not** a striving.

The differences and similarities, in terms of abstraction, among each of these constructs are probably best illustrated in a diagram taken from Emmons (1989) (p.93).

High abstraction level

Level 1.

**Motive Dispositions**

Level 2.

**Personal Strivings**

Level 3.

**Projects**

**Plans**

**Tasks**

**Concerns**

Level 4.

**Specific Action Units**

Low abstraction level

Figure 1. An illustration of the levels of abstraction in different goal concepts according to Emmons (1989).

There are two main reasons why the project as unit of analysis was preferred by the present study. The first reason related to the degree of theoretical and methodological development while the second pertained to the salience of the concept to subjects.

The project appears to be the goal concept most endowed with theoretical and methodological development. Little's (1983) article was dedicated primarily to the provision of a theoretical rationale for studying projects. This level of theoretical development was of decisive importance for the present study as the intention was to move briskly on from the general introductory level to the relationships of projects with further domains of human experience. Also detailed in Little's (1983) article was a

sound accompanying assessment methodology based on the repertory grid technique. This methodology seems further developed and is more widely applicable than the methodologies accompanying plans, concerns or tasks.

The striving, on the other hand, does have a well-developed methodology (modelled on that of the project!) and reasonable theoretical development. Emmons (1986) has promoted the striving as a suitable alternative to traits for studying personality especially given the stable nature of the concept and this is probably a reasonable assertion. However, the present study is concerned with studying patterns of action rather than personality and the very definition of the striving restricts its utility in this context. The definition offered by Emmons (1986) requires goals and actions to be united around a *high or superordinate core need*. The problem with this definition is that individuals may not always be as aware of their higher needs as they are of their actions. Pervin (1982) has noted that though people are often unaware of their core needs and the specific goals they adopt to meet these needs, they are much more aware of their extended plans of action. Murray (1938), also, has pointed out that the extended plans of action linking specific goals chosen to meet universal needs are more available for conscious report than are either needs or goals. According to this argument, even though subjects might verbalise what they think to be their strivings, they may only be cognizant of what they are consciously doing or acting on. For instance, a person may have a core need to be loved by others but may not necessarily be so aware of this need that they can articulate it as such. They may, however, be able to articulate the plans of action organised around this need such as "make more friends" or "read more books on relationships". Again, this notion reflects back to the earlier hermeneutical argument that meaning is best able to be elucidated from people's patterns of action.

The problem of awareness was also raised by Zirkel and Cantor (1990). They were aware that life tasks, which are supposed to be moderately abstract, are not always available to awareness. Consequently, they study life tasks only at times of life transition (such as leaving home for university) when people's goals are more easily articulated.

In summary of this chapter, an alternative approach to conventional 'reactive' theories



for the study of human experience has been proposed. This approach emphasizes as its unit of study patterns of purposeful human action. Many of these units have emerged in the literature with considerable conceptual overlap, but for the purposes of the present study the personal project as developed by Little (1983) was deemed most appropriate.