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Personal Growth Interpretation of Goal Attainment as a New Construct Relevant to Well-being

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Abstract

Personal growth interpretation (PGI) of attained goals is one kind of positive cognition that contributes to well-being. We identify five facets of PGI: Concordance Competence, Specific Competence, Efficacy Competence, Cumulative Competence, and Facilitated Competence. We report on the development of a tool, the Personal Growth Interpretation Scale (PGI Scale), which measures these five facets. Analyses provided initial descriptive statistics and indicated adequate construct validity. It is recommended that the PGI Scale is utilized in future research investigating the relationship between PGI, need satisfaction and well-being.

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1. Introduction

How does one achieve well-being? A number of researchers have argued that well-being is determined to a certain extent by one's cognitions (e.g., Beck, 1976), such as how one interprets the outcomes of one's goal-directed behaviours. First, Seligman and colleagues (e.g., Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988) originally identified explanatory style as an important causal factor in depression. In particular, the way in which people explain what has happened to them (e.g., obtaining a fail grade) can vary, and can have consequences for psychological health. Regardless of the content of the event (fail grade), people usually make an effort to find a cause of the event, and in doing so they may attribute the cause in various ways. Three dimensions of explanations were identified: (1) internal vs. external, (2) stable vs. unstable, and (3) global vs. specific (Gillham, Shatté, Reivich & Seligman, 2001).

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Second, Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) defined subjective well-being as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life, suggesting that it is not just who we are, but how we think about our lives, that is important. Third, Lyubomirsky and Dickerhoof (2010) argued that "construal" is an important contributor to happiness, as it has been found that happy individuals retrospectively evaluate experiences as more pleasant at both the time of occurrence and when recalling them. Moreover, it is thought that positive psychology interventions increase the propensity of participants to construe in a more positive fashion (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2010).

According to Self-determination Theory (SDT), psychological need satisfaction is the key element for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci, Ryan and colleagues argue that within the context of SDT, well-being is achieved when the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are met (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). Sheldon and colleagues (e.g., Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) extended Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT with the Self-Concordance Model of Healthy Goal-Striving. Sheldon and colleagues' research suggests that achievement of self-concordant goals (made on the basis of implicit values and interests and then pursued for autonomous reasons; i.e., intrinsic goal content) results in higher life satisfaction (Sheldon, Kasser, Smith & Share, 2002).

A related theoretical approach is that of Carol Ryff and colleagues (Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008) who draw on Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia to argue that psychological well-being is not just about pleasure versus pain but rather, "personal growth". Ryff and Singer (2008) argued that there are health benefits associated with "living a life rich in purpose and meaning, continued growth, and quality ties to others" (p.13). Clearly these personal growth concepts draw on the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Together, these different theoretical approaches suggest that the way in which we approach goals and interpret the outcomes of goal-directed behaviour will influence well-being. In particular, the adoption of both (a) "can do with effort" attitude to forming and striving for goals (i.e., high self-efficacy), and (b) an adaptive rather than self-defeating interpretation of goal outcomes, will increase the possibility that psychological needs are satisfied, thus increasing well-being. In this study, we focus on the second component regarding interpretation of attained goals. For example, those who tend to internally attribute causes of goal attainment are more likely to be psychologically healthy than those who tend to externally attribute causes of goal attainment.

There would appear to be several ways in which one could interpret goal attainment such that personal growth is promoted by satisfying psychological needs. Nevertheless, in attaining a goal, the need that is most obviously met is that of competence (interestingly there is no literature on this issue). At the same time, however, various other needs may be met, depending on the circumstances that lead to the goal being attained. We have identified five facets of personal growth interpretation of goal attainment: Specific Competence, Cumulative Competence, Facilitated Competence, Concordant Competence, and Efficacy Competence (Bahrami-Ehsan & Cranney, 2013). With Specific Competence, one directly attributes goal attainment to one's specific ability, competence and effort in striving for the goal, and so the need for competence is directly met. In this study, this interpretation was indexed by agreement with the statement "I attained the goal because of my own ability and competence".

With Cumulative Competence, one attributes goal attainment to one's competence that may be either specific to the goal attained or may be general to many goals, some of which were obtained due to one's effort and competence and some of which were not obtained due to negative chance factors beyond one's control. Thus, if obtaining the current goal was facilitated by positive chance factors, then in the context of past strivings for obtained and un-obtained goals, one may feel as though one deserved to obtain this specific goal. In this study, this interpretation was indexed by agreement with the statement "I attained the goal because I deserved achieving this goal". This interpretation thus may take a longer-term view of cumulative goal attainment and non-attainment, in the context of a belief in one's own competence (self-efficacy) but an acknowledgement of the role of chance factors (negative and positive).

With Facilitated Competence, one's efforts to obtain a specific goal are facilitated by others. Thus, obtaining the goal meets the need for competence—perhaps not quite as much as if one had achieved the goal without that support (i.e., there is some external attribution)—but this is offset by the simultaneous meeting of the need for relatedness (i.e., some other people cared enough to support one's goal striving). In this study, this interpretation was indexed by agreement with the statement "I attained the goal because I received helpful and welcome support from others."

With Concordant Competence, one's effort to attain the goal is related to the need for autonomy which drives autonomous motivation and the intrinsic content of those goals. Thus, goal attainment supports the needs for both

autonomy and competence. In this study, this interpretation was indexed by agreement with the statement “I attained the goal because I chose it as personally meaningful”. Clearly, this personal growth interpretation relates to Sheldon’s Self-Concordance Model of Healthy Goal Striving (Sheldon, 2002).

With Efficacy Competence, regardless of the nuances of internal and external attribution, short- and long-term goal attainment, and the autonomous nature of goal content, there is an overall assessment of the value of attaining the goal, which then results in satisfaction of the need for competence and increased self-efficacy. In this study, this interpretation was indexed by agreement with the statement “Attaining this goal was really valuable and important to me”. Essentially, if people attain their goals and primarily make an internal attribution, this usually contributes to what Ryff and Singer (2008) have characterised as “personal growth”.

This study reports a new brief measure, the Personal Growth Interpretation Scale (PGI Scale), which asks respondents to identify the most important goal that they attained in the past four weeks, and then to rate what they think about the attainment of the goal in relation to a number of different facets of personal growth, which draw on psychological needs such as competence. We expect that each of the PGI facets would predict the total PGI scale score (see Figure 1).

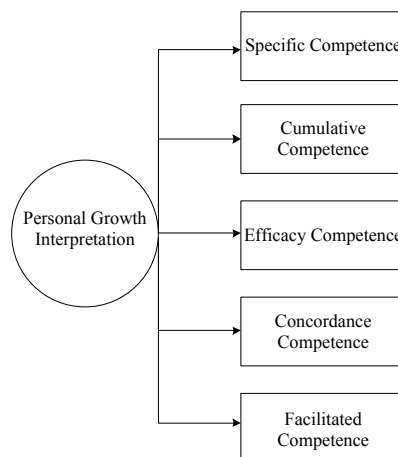


Figure 1. Construal model for personal growth interpretation.

2. Method

A total of 117 undergraduate students (mean age = 19.73; SD = 2.60; 70 females) from The University of New South Wales were recruited to take part in this study. This study was approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel (Psychology). All participants were provided with a link that directed them first to the study description and consent form page, and then to the set of questionnaires, all were programmed in Key Survey software.

To investigate how participants apply personal growth interpretations after they attain an important goal, we constructed the Goal Attained Questionnaire. The introductory instructions were:

Consider the period of the PAST 4 weeks. Within that period, you would have had some goals (study, work, personal) that you strived toward achieving (e.g., finish an assignment; visit a relative; go to the gym; spend more time with your children or with your partner; serve your God better by praying every day; complete one’s tax return; eat at a new restaurant; apply for a new job). We would like you to think about what was the MOST IMPORTANT goal that you attained in the past 4 weeks. It is important that you think about the most important goal that you COMPLETELY achieved. Please write down what that goal was:

In the overall scheme of things, how important was that goal for you?

They responded to the second question using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Not important at all” to 4 = “Moderately important” to 7 = “Extremely important”). Personal growth interpretation was indexed by 5 items, which

collectively are called the “Personal Growth Interpretation Scale” (PGI Scale). The instruction for those items was: “Please just focus on that goal and carefully answer the questions below”, and for each of the five statements already given in the Introduction section, participants rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” to 4 = “Neither agree nor disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”). The overall PGI Scale score was computed by adding the responses to these five items. The possible range of scores is thus 5 to 35. It is assumed that a high score on this scale indicates a high level of personal growth interpretation.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the means and SDs of the individual facets/items. The mean total PGI Scale Score was 26.41 (SD = 4.06). All PGI facets correlated significantly with the PGI total (see Table 1). Then, by using confirmatory factor analysis (Harrington, 2008), we tested our suggested model (see Figure 1) for the personal growth interpretation construct which includes five exogenous variables or facets (Facilitated Competence, Concordance Competence, Specific Competence, Cumulative Competence, and Efficacy Competence) and one endogenous variable (i.e., Total PGI; Harrington, 2008). SEM analysis yielded significant goodness of fit regarding our model that each of the exogenous variables would predict the endogenous variable of Total PGI ($\chi^2(5, N = 117) = 7.96, p < 0.16$; Goodness of Fit Index [GFI] = 0.97; Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index [AGFI] = 0.91; Normal Fit Index (NFI) = 0.98; Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 0.99; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = 0.07;. All standardised regression coefficients were significant, indicating that each of the exogenous variables predicted PGI (see Figure 1). In summary, these results indicate that the PGI scale has good construct validity.

Table 1. Means, SDs, Correlations and Standardised Regression Coefficients (β) for each of the Exogenous Variables in Relation to the Endogenous Variable of Personal Growth Interpretation (PGI)

Exogenous variables	M	SD	r	β	S.E	t
Facilitated Competence: “I attained the goal because I received helpful and welcome support from others”	4.72	1.55	0.592**	0.43***	0.007	20.99
Concordance Competence: “I attained the goal because I chose it as personally meaningful”	5.33	1.50	0.580**	0.42***	0.007	20.83
Specific Competence: “I attained the goal because of my own ability and competence”	5.75	.95	0.442**	0.24***	0.017	11.59
Cumulative Competence: “I attained the goal because I deserved achieving this goal”	4.84	1.34	0.670**	0.32***	0.010	14.10
Efficacy Competence: “Attaining this goal was really valuable and important for me”	5.78	1.10	0.653**	0.40***	0.014	18.98

Note: $p < 0.01$ **; $p < 0.001$ ***.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research emphasizes PGI as aspect of positive cognition, which has been hypothesized to play a role in enhancing well-being (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2010). The particular focus was on cognitions following goal attainment, with the assumption being that even when one attains a goal, how one interprets that episode can influence the psychological outcome: that is, the interpretation may or may not enhance personal growth. We argue that PGI, as a form of positive cognition, is important to well-being, such that any specification of facets of PGI can contribute to more effective interventions to increase PGI of goal attainment, and thus well-being.

Analyses provided initial descriptive statistics and indicated adequate construct validity for the PGI Scale. The PGI can be utilized in research investigating the nature of well-being, such as the relative role of positive emotions and positive cognitions in increased well-being following goal attainment (Bahrami-Ehsan & Cranney, 2013).

It should be noted that Seligman et al's (1988) attribution theory would have predicted that maladaptive cognitive functioning if one attributed some positive event, such as goal attainment, to external factors, such as other people helps, rather than to internal factors, such as one's own efforts. However the facilitated competence facet of PGI acknowledges that often we need other people to help us to obtain our goals. Thus, although our efforts may have been critical, it is often adaptive to seek and/or accept the assistance of others in striving to obtain a goal. Hence, some external attribution is not detrimental.

One potential criticism of the PGI Scale is that it may not cover all facets of positive cognition following goal attainment, as the emphasis with the PGI Scale is on personal growth, with reference to potential need satisfaction. Nevertheless, these foundational constructs are clearly established in the well-being literature, and we expect that future research will identify any missing facets to PGI.

Another limitation of the current research is that it is based on retrospective self-reports regarding intentions and cognitions over the past month. The role of factors such as cognitive dissonance in reshaping our recollections of past events may well have increased the distance between past realities and current recollections. Nevertheless, it has been argued that self-report can be the most appropriate measure in some situations, such as with well-being (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Indeed, studies have demonstrated that self-report measures of well-being are positively associated with peer and spouse reports of well-being and with objective measures (e.g., smiling behaviour, recall of events, and physiological responses; (Harker & Keltner, 2001; Seidnitz, Wyer Jr, & Diener, 1997).

In summary, then, it is recommended that the PGI Scale is utilized in future research investigating the relationship between PGI, emotions, need satisfaction, psychological well-being and mental health.

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