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Contents:

Review T.L. Giluk	805 Mindfulness, Big Five personality, and affect: A meta-analysis
General Articles J.F. Wallace, M.B. Malterer and J.P. Newman	812 Mapping Gray's BIS and BAS constructs onto Factor 1 and Factor 2 of Hare's Psychopathy Checklist - Revised
W. Cheng and W. Ickes	817 Conscientiousness and self-motivation as mutually compensatory predictors of university-level GPA
F. Tabak, N. Nguyen, T. Basuray and W. Darrow	823 Exploring the impact of personality on performance: How time-on-task moderates the mediation by self-efficacy
W.J. Phillips, D.W. Hine and A.D.G. Marks	829 Individual differences in trait urgency moderate the role of the affect heuristic in adolescent binge drinking
M. Cima and A. Raine	835 Distinct characteristics of psychopathy relate to different subtypes of aggression
P.C.L. Heaven, J. Clarocho and P. Leeson	841 The longitudinal links between shame and increasing hostility during adolescence
M. Grumm and G. von Collani	845 Personality types and self-reported aggressiveness
A. Besser, Y. Neria and M. Haynes	851 Adult attachment, perceived stress, and PTSD among civilians exposed to ongoing terrorist attacks in Southern Israel
M. Balconi, L. Falbo and E. Brambilla	858 BIS/BAS responses to emotional cues: Self report, autonomic measure and alpha band modulation

[Continued on outside back cover]

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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid**Goal agreement and relationship quality among college students and their parents****Lindsay C. Morton^{*}, Patrick M. Markey***Villanova University, 800 Lancaster Avenue, Villanova, PA 19085, United States***ARTICLE INFO****Article history:**

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ABSTRACT

Two hundred eight parent–college student dyads (total $N = 416$) participated in the current study, which examined the link between goal agreement and perceived conflict within their relationships. Undergraduate participants (91 male, 117 female) completed a demographic form, a 65 items goal measure, and a measure of parental conflict. Parents (98 fathers, 110 mothers) were asked to rate the importance of the same 65 goals for their emerging adult children. College students tended to place more importance on independence, affect control, health, social relationships, and financial concern goals than their parents did, whereas parents placed more importance on moral and religious goals than their emerging adult children did. However, relative goal agreement between parents and college students was found to be moderately high. Those parent–college student dyads who experienced less conflict tended to have higher goal agreement, whereas those dyads with a higher level of conflict had lower goal agreement. These findings provide further evidence for the link between interpersonal relationships and the personality construct of goals.

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1. Introduction

Goal strivings during the college years are an important aspect of identity development (Smollar & Youniss, 1989). Between the ages of 18–25, most individuals enter a period of emerging adulthood, in which they explore and experience frequent changes in the domains of love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults who head off to college are faced with a multitude of choices that affect their futures, and the decisions made throughout this time are assumed to have repercussions for one's adult life. A primary task during this developmental stage is to determine the importance and implications of goals in the transition to adulthood. Emerging adults must select goals that take into account their limited energy and that also reflect their interests, abilities, and personality (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004).

The examination of goals allows for a detailed investigation into specific aspects of an individual's personality (McAdams, 1995). Unlike traits, which are seen as relatively stable and decontextualized, an individual's goals refer to certain desired future end states and are expressed during particular periods and conditions in one's life. Goals provide a link between broad dispositions and the construction and evaluation of one's social world (Roberts & Robins, 2000), and they have been shown to have rank-order stability in college students (Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004). The current study defines a goal as the aim that an individual is trying to accomplish either in the long-term or in the immediate future.

Such a general definition of goals has been utilized by past researchers to examine the structure and content of goals as well as the implications of goal choice, pursuit, and attainment or failure (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981).

The content of one's goals and the processes through which an individual achieves or abandons such goals is highly influenced by the surrounding social world. Self-determination theory explains that significant others can induce an individual to accept and internalize certain roles or identities (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Because both immediate and long-term goals are inherent in all identities, the push by parents towards a certain identity and the child's possible acceptance and internalization of this identity are an obvious way in which parents might foster certain goals within their children. Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory postulates that an individual strives to fulfill the ideals and obligations of not only oneself but also those of significant others in his or her life. Significant others also affect goal pursuit by influencing how individuals evaluate a goal's value, likelihood, and importance (Shah, 2003b). Such findings highlight the notion that an individual's choice of goals and behavior aimed at the attainment of those goals are tied to the relationships with people who play a significant role in his or her life.

Correspondingly, one of the most important relationships throughout a person's life is often the one between a parent and child. In the move to college a transformation often occurs in the relationship between students and their parents in such domains as contact, communication, conflict, and understanding (Dubas & Petersen, 1996). A review of cases from a university counseling

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center found that students reported problems and conflicts with parents as causing stress and concern (Anderson & Yuenger, 1987). Parental expectations and conflicts with one's parents were rated as the second highest personal stressor among college students (Archer & Lammin, 1985). A study of Taiwanese college students found that psychological distress was linked to the perception of living up to parental expectations (Wang & Heppner, 2002). Even though these residential college students no longer lived with their parents, the quality of their relationships to their parents played a significant role in their ratings of distress and happiness.

In addition to the impact that parental expectations have on college students, it is plausible that parents may directly transmit goals to their maturing children. Considerable overlap has been shown between the ideals and obligations that individuals have for themselves and those that individuals feel their parents hold for them (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). In a study of Swiss adolescents, a mean correlation of slightly above .20 was found for adolescents' own ideal life goals and parental ideal life goals for their adolescents (Zentner & Renaud, 2007). These studies suggest moderate agreement about goals and ideals between parents and their maturing children.

2. Current study

While perceptions play a role in individual outcomes, such as stress and well-being, it is hypothesized that dyadic agreement about goals may have interpersonal relevance. It seems plausible that the parent–college student relationship may be associated with goal agreement during the period of emerging adulthood when goal choices are developmentally significant and the parent–emerging adult relationship is still influential. In recent research, the bidirectional interaction that occurs between a parent and child, which includes such factors as relationship quality and conflict, has been related to parental socialization of goals and values (Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000). Parents' perceptions of the goals possible for their child and evaluation of their child's standing in relation to that goal are seen as essential elements in the exploration of children's goal acceptance and internalization. Because of the wealth of research that focuses on the parent–child relationship as the unit of study (e.g., Smollar & Youniss, 1989), the current work examined views of both members of the parent–college student dyad, the concordance between their goal evaluations, and its connection to relationship quality and conflict.

The focus on conflict resolution in the current study stems from evidence that disagreements are an inevitable part of this relationship (van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). The ability of parents to accurately perceive their child's thoughts and feelings during conflict has been related to positive conflict resolution as well as relationship satisfaction (Hastings & Grusec, 1997). Interdependence theory further posits that inadequate information, which includes a lack of understanding or knowledge of another's goals and motives, can lead to challenges in interactions and relationships (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For this reason, the current study explored the connection between parent–college student goal agreement and the college student's perception of conflict response and resolution within the relationship.

In order to determine how college students and their parents evaluate different goals, the similarity between the level of importance that undergraduate students and their parents assigned to different types of goals was examined. This information draws attention to the motivational focus of these emerging adults as well as the goal orientation that their parents think they should have. Because past work has only measured the college student's perception of goal agreement, the current study was designed to examine the level of actual parent–college student goal agreement.

It was hypothesized that low parent–college student goal agreement would be related to high conflict, and high parent–college student goal agreement would be related to low conflict. Although there is a certain amount of love and acceptance found within most parent–child relationships, there is also a certain amount of conflict in these relationships (van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). College students' perception of their level of conflict and of the outcome of such conflicts was hypothesized to differ between participants in this study. It was further hypothesized that this perception of interpersonal conflict and behaviors associated with conflict resolution found within the parent–college student dyad would be related to goal agreement.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

For this study, 254 undergraduate student participants were recruited. Each received partial course credit as compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to send either their mother or father figure a packet of materials to complete. Due to an 81.9% parental response rate, the sample for the current study consisted of 208 complete parent–college student dyads (total $N = 416$). The participants in this study consisted of 98 fathers and 110 mothers along with 91 male and 117 female emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 23.

3.2. Procedure

Participants signed a statement of informed consent and then were asked to fill out two envelopes with the name and address of one of their parents. Participants were told that the materials to be sent to parents were similar to the questionnaires that they would be completing, but in order to avoid response biases, it was not until the debriefing that participants were told that parents would be asked to rate goals for them. The first envelope contained a brief questionnaire packet along with a parental information and instruction letter, which was adapted from Bachrach (2006). The second envelope, which contained a reminder letter for the parent to return their completed forms, was sent one week later. After addressing the envelopes, participants completed a measure that assessed demographic information and the participant's exact relationship to their parental figure (i.e., biological parent, step-parent, adopted parent, or other). Participants were then given the remaining questionnaires and, afterward, were debriefed.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Respondent goal measure

This measure assessed the importance to which participants assigned 65 different goals in eight categories (Howell, Hershey, Markey, & Ozer, 2001; Kaiser & Ozer, 1997). Participants rated each goal item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not currently an important goal) to 5 (among my most important goals). The 65 items represent eight broad goal categories: social relationships (15 goal items; e.g., "Make new friends"), financial concerns (10 goal items; e.g., "Increase my current income"), affect control (9 goal items; e.g., "Stop worrying so much"), academic/occupational (8 goal items; e.g., "Spend more time studying"), health (7 goal items; e.g., "Get in better shape"), independence (7 goal items; e.g., "Be less dependent on or influenced by others"), moral or religious (5 goal items; e.g., "Observe the tenets of my religion"), and organization (4 goal items; e.g., "Be more organized"). D. Ozer and colleagues have created this taxonomy by examining and

categorizing over 10,000 goals provided by over 2000 participants (Howell et al., 2001). Previous research has shown that responses on this questionnaire are related to basic motives in a predictable manner and are even longitudinally predictive of emotional stress when some types of goal are not accomplished (Kaiser & Ozer, 1997; Markey & Ozer, 1999). The mean of each goal category was computed from the associated individual goal items to determine the score for that goal category (the mean alpha reliability of the eight goal categories was .76; range = .59 [social] to .85 [academic]). Because participants were responding with how important each goal item was to them at the present time, the goal category score reflects participants' assessments of how important certain types of goals were to them.

3.3.2. Parent-child interaction questionnaire – revised

Undergraduate participants also completed the child version of the parent-child interaction questionnaire (PACHIQ-R-CH; Lange, Evers, Jansen, & Dolan, 2002), which assessed conflict resolution and acceptance between emerging adults and their parents. Questions in this measure asked undergraduate participants about how well they got along with their parent, about whether fights were easily resolved, and about the amount of positive and negative communication in their relationship. The current study used both the child-father version ($\alpha = .88$) and the child-mother version ($\alpha = .93$). Scores on this measure were reversed so that higher scores reflected increased levels of parent-college conflict with lower levels of resolution and less positive communication following disagreement. A low score would indicate that the emerging adult felt that his or her parent deals well with conflict in their relationship and is understanding and responsive.

3.3.3. Parent goal measure

This measure asked one of the participants' parents to rate the same 65 goal items as the Respondent Goal Measure. Parents were instructed to rate each goal item on how important they believed the goal should be to their son or daughter. Similar to the Respondent Goal Measure, goal category scores were formed by obtaining the mean score of all the goal items in each category (the mean alpha reliability of the eight goal categories was .74; range = .52 [affect] to .82 [academic]).

4. Results

In the following analyses, no consistent gender differences were found and all reported analyses were conducted across gender. One

aim of the current study was to determine how emerging adults and their parents evaluated different goals. Fig. 1 displays the mean importance rating that emerging adults and their parents gave to each goal category. A 2 (college student vs. parent) \times 8 (goal category) repeated ANOVA was conducted to examine these goal ratings. Results indicated that college students tended to rate their goals as more important than their parents thought they should rate them, $F(1,207) = 21.27, p < .01$. A main effect of goal category indicated that some goal categories were seen as more important than others, $F(7, 1449) = 249.9, p < .01$. Deviation contrasts indicated that academic and independence goals tended to be rated as most important, $F(1, 207) = 1700.06, p < .01$, and $F(1, 207) = 111.88, p < .01$, respectively. Social, financial, and health goals tended to be rated as least important, $F(1, 207) = 576.78, p < .01$, $F(1, 207) = 347.16, p < .01$, and $F(1, 207) = 113.31, p < .01$, respectively. Finally, the significant interaction yielded by the 2×8 ANOVA implies that parents and college students sometimes disagreed about the overall importance of some goal categories, $F(7,1449) = 40.63, p < .01$. Simple effects were computed in order to examine the effect of rater (college student vs. parent) for each goal category. Results indicated that college students felt that their independence, $F(1,1449) = 9.69, p < .01$, affect, $F(1,1449) = 56.39, p < .01$, health, $F(1,1449) = 36.53, p < .01$, social, $F(1,1449) = 94.23, p < .01$, and financial, $F(1,1449) = 94.44, p < .01$, goals were more important than their parents thought they should be, whereas parents felt that moral and religious, $F(1,1449) = 53.67, p < .01$, goals should be more important than their emerging adult children did.

Although there were some mean differences in goal importance, this does not mean that parent and college students disagreed about which goals were *relatively* most important. In order to determine the average amount of relative goal agreement between each parent-college student dyad, goal agreement was first calculated by computing a Pearson correlation between each participant's ratings of the 65 goals and his or her parent's corresponding goal ratings. Therefore, each parent-college student dyad received a Pearson correlation ranging from -1.00 (there was perfect disagreement between parent and college student as to the relative importance of each goal) to 1.00 (there was perfect agreement between parent and college student as to the relative importance of each goal). Pearson correlations were computed because this statistic is unaffected by differences in profile elevation (Terracciano & McCrae, 2006) and only reflects the similarity (or dissimilarity) in profile shape. Intraclass correlations were not computed to examine relative goal agreement because these coefficients would be affected by elevation differences (i.e., the overall

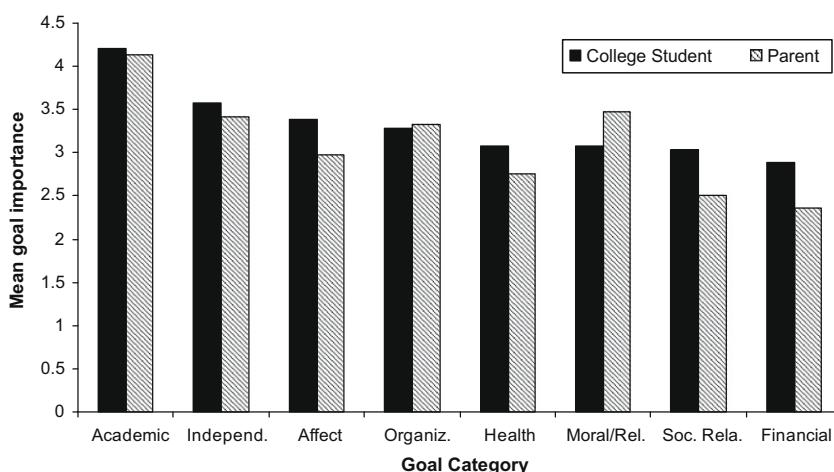


Fig. 1. Participants' mean goal ratings for each goal category.

mean differences in goal importance between parents and college students; McCrae, 2008). Unlike an intraclass correlation, a Pearson correlation would produce a high coefficient when the goals a college student thought were most important relative to the other goals were the same goals their parents thought were most important relative to the other goals. The mean goal agreement correlation for the 208 parent-college student dyads in this study was 0.36 ($SD = .17$, range = -.40 to .71). This moderate, positive correlation demonstrates that parent-college student dyads tended to agree about the relative importance of the 65 goal items. A randomization test was then used to test the resulting mean goal agreement correlation for significance. This test yields an exact probability of obtaining a mean r value of .36 under the null hypothesis that college students were randomly paired with parents. To do this, 1000 samples of randomly paired parent-college student dyads were created (Hubert & Arabie, 1987; Markey & Markey, 2006; Rounds, Tracey, & Hubert, 1992). An exact probability value associated with the goal agreement correlation of .36 was then computed by dividing the number of times a goal agreement correlation from the randomly created sampling distribution exceeded the initial goal agreement correlation by 1000. The resulting randomization test was significant ($p = .046$) with only 46 of the 1000 randomly created samples producing an r value greater than the found r value between the actual parent-college student dyads.

Finally, correlations were computed between each dyad's parent-college student goal agreement correlation (i.e., the correlation yielded from the previous analysis) and the conflict score. Consistent with the hypothesis, it was found that emerging adults and parents with high goal agreement had lower conflict scores, whereas emerging adults and parents with low goal agreement had higher conflict scores ($r(206) = -.22$, $p < .01$).

5. Discussion

The current study assessed the importance that college students and their parents assigned to 65 different goals. The assessment of parental views of their children's goals is a valuable area of inquiry due to previous findings that have shown that the views held by significant others play an important role in one's own goal evaluations and efforts (Shah 2003a; Shah 2003b). Not surprisingly, it was found that both college students and their parents felt that academic goals were most important. However, college students tended to feel their independence, affect, health, social, and financial goals were more important to them than their parents thought they should be. Parents, on the other hand, felt that moral and religious goals should be more important for their college-aged children than those emerging adults felt these goals were important for themselves. Such results suggest some general disagreement between these college students and their parents as to the *absolute* importance of different types of goals. The finding that college students rated many of the goals as more important than their parents felt they should be may reflect a trend for one to generally consider one's own goals as more important than another may evaluate that person's goals. At the same time, subsequent analyses found a significant level of agreement between how relatively important college students believed certain goals to be and the relative importance their parents prescribed to those same goals. In other words, the college students and their parents tended to agree about which goals were more important than other goals.

These findings are in line with several of the theories advanced earlier, such as Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory as well as Ryan and Deci's (2003) self-determination theory. Self-discrepancy theory states that individuals are motivated to reach an agreement between their self-concepts and the selves that significant others would like them to ideally be (e.g., their hopes and aspirations)

or that they think one should or ought to be (e.g., duties and obligations). In the current study, parents were asked how they believed their children should rate specific goals, and moderate agreement was found between college students' own goals and their parents' aspirations for them. Similarly, self-determination theory, which states that significant others can encourage an individual to take on certain identities, may also shed light on the findings of the current study. The level of goal agreement found between the college students and their parents could be interpreted as the emerging adults' acceptance and internalization of the identities that their parents hope for them to assume.

One unique aspect of the current study is that it also measured undergraduate participants' perceptions about the level of conflict and acceptance in their relationship with a particular parent. The relationship between emerging adults and their parents is one that demonstrates a high level of both harmony and disagreement (van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). The use of the PACHIQ-R (Lange et al., 2002) allowed the researcher to examine how aspects of this important interpersonal relationship were related to the individual personality feature of goals. The results of the current study suggest that higher goal agreement between college-aged participants and their parents was related to lower conflict and more positive interactions that reflected a greater level of communication and agreement.

When interpreting the results of this study, one must also take into account the limitations of the current research. One issue, which is relevant to many studies but no less problematic, is the inability to generalize the current findings to different populations. The participants sampled in the current study all ranged in age from 18 to 23 years and were in the process of receiving higher education at a private university. Although academic goals were rated most importantly among both college students and their parents, such results might differ among other populations, including similarly aged emerging adults not engaged in higher education. It should also be acknowledged that the opportunity for independent exploration of one's goals that is prominent in emerging adulthood may be constrained to the majority culture in industrialized societies (Arnett, 2000). Thus, although the current research provides a valuable extension by examining familial relationships and goal strivings among emerging adults, generalization to minorities and non-industrialized countries warrants further investigation. Another limitation of the current study was the use of a goal measure on which participants were asked to rate the importance of 65 goal items. Although the use of this measure allowed the current research to quantitatively assess goal importance across college students and parents as well as across dyads, the measure used may have failed to address all of the possible goals thought to be important by the college-aged participants and their parents. By presenting participants with specific goals to evaluate, it is possible that an individual's most important, idiographic goals could have been overlooked. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this research makes it impossible to determine the causal direction between goal agreement and conflict. Future researchers might consider a longitudinal design to help clarify the direction of this relationship. A final limitation of the present research was that only a small proportion (<2%) of the participants were not biologically related to the participating parent. There were very few parent-college student relationships that exhibited an adopted, step, or other family dynamic. Without such alternative relationships, it is difficult to interpret the possible role that genetic relatedness plays when studying this aspect of personality.

Future research might want to explore several variables, such as the early parent-child relationship, parenting style, parental control, and the parents' personal goals, which might be implicated in the link between the parent-college student relationship and goal agreement. It is possible that goal agreement and current conflict within the parent-college student dyad might be due, in part,

to a third factor such as the quality of the early parent-child relationship. Because the current work only assessed the college student's view of conflict resolution within the relationship, subsequent research would benefit from assessing parental views as well. Additionally, the type of parenting style that a parent employs may be a factor that affects relationship quality, communication, and the way in which emerging adults and their parents evaluate the college student's goals. Forthcoming work would also benefit by measuring the level of external pressure that parents place on their college-aged children to reach the goals that they think they should. Finally, through modeling, parents' own goals for themselves may play a role in emerging adults' selection and pursuit of goals. Further research that examines these factors would help to determine their connection to the parent-college student relationship and goal agreement.

In today's American society, college-aged individuals are less constrained both by the restrictions of parents often found in adolescence and by the role requirements usually found in adulthood (Arnett, 2000). For those who enter college, emerging adulthood is a semiautonomous period, characterized by independent living coupled with remaining dependence on parents and other adults. This is also a period in which goal choices and pursuit will have lasting effects in adulthood. Although the students in this sample rated academic goals as the most important overall, there was some variety in the undergraduate participants' responses. The findings of the current study support the idea that parental influence on college students' evaluations of goal importance may be stronger when the relationship between parents and their college-aged children experiences less conflict. Because past research has shown that goal achievement is significantly related to an individual's well-being (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Brunstein, 1993; King et al., 1998), a critical avenue for future research is the examination of how goal agreement may act to promote goal attainment and how the parent-college student relationship may play a pivotal role in this achievement.

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