The role of personality in the pursuit of context-specific goals
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Kurt Lewin (1936) famously made an equation of human behavior as a function of the person and one’s environment. This equation has been applied broadly as a basis of various psychological processes over the subsequent decades. However, it is far too common that one aspect of the equation is favored over the other, which reflects in the traditional divide between social psychology’s emphasis of environment and personality psychology’s emphasis of the person. To fully explore psychological processes, both the environment and the person should be integrated into research questions. In line with more recent developments in both personality and social psychology, I propose a means to integrate two fundamental concepts: personality traits and motives within a specific environment (i.e., context-specific goals).

Traits and motives are two key concepts in the history of psychology, each with a rich tradition spanning over several decades. However, these two concepts have largely developed independently from each other, which is likely due to their early origins. In the 1930’s Gordon Allport and Henry Murray each advocated for central concepts of human behavior. Allport (1937) stressed that one’s personality could be defined in terms of traits that describe how people behave in general (but included motivational traits among them). Alternatively, Murray (1938) proposed that motives were more fundamental and more essential in explaining behavior. While the trait and motive traditions acknowledged the importance of and the mutual compatibility of each other, advancements in traits and motives remained mainly independent and lacked strong development of their relationships (McClelland, 1951).

Researchers in the last couple of decades have started to bridge this divide, showing that traits and goals are related constructs (Bleidorn, 2009; Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992; Roberts & Robins, 2000; Roberts, O’Donnell, & Robins, 2004; Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998), and changes in life goals do predict changes in personality development (Roberts,
O’Donnell, & Robins, 2004). However, more work needs to be done to explore how these concepts are related and the processes occur in daily life.

The purpose of this research is twofold. First, this research serves to explore how traits and motives are related. This investigation involves exploring this concept with broad, holistic personality traits of the Big Five, and also with the specific dimensions of perfectionism. Second, this research serves to investigate specific, momentary processes in which traits and motives function. This emphasis of process requires investigation at the context-specific level for both personality (i.e., personality states) and motives (i.e., context-specific goal pursuit).

This research is important for at least three reasons. First, this research proposes a process in which personality traits can explain personality processes rather than merely describing how people are different. Currently, personality traits can describe ways in which people are different and predict outcomes for people who are high or low on a given trait. For example, we know that extraverts tend to be more talkative, sociable, and energetic than introverts, and we know that extraversion has a strong, positive relation with positive affect (Lucas & Fujita, 2000). This work proposes why people differ in their traits by investigating the specific, momentary process of both their personality and goals. In this sense, the reason why extraverts and introverts are different could be, in part, due to their different types of goal pursuit.

Second, this research proposes a practical means in which people may choose to change their behavior. If context-specific goals cause changes in personality states, then goal adoption may be pivotal in how people can change their behavior. Moreover, this idea may reflect on existing work from Roberts, O’Donnell, and Robins (2004) that found that changes in life goal importance were related to changes in personality over a four-year span. These results suggest that not only does personality predict changes in contextual behavior, but this contextual behavior may also predict changes in personality over time. As such, goals may provide a key process by which people may change their personality traits over time.
Third, this research investigates how personality is integrated with achievement goal processes. Context-specific goals may predict specific changes in momentary personality, but it also could predict different achievement outcomes (e.g., performance and affect) through these changes in personality. These specific achievement processes could be beneficial across various achievement domains, such as school, work, and sport.

In the next section, I shall outline the basic theoretical model that runs throughout the entire work. Each of these chapters tackled different parts of this theoretical model. Moreover, different concepts were used as a means to test the scope and applicability of this model in different areas of research. The core principle—the relations between personality and context-specific goals—is the main thread present throughout this work.

**Whole Trait Theory**

Whole Trait Theory (Fleeson, 2001; 2012) proposes a process model that integrates personality traits and social contexts. This theory shifts attention from general, broad measures of personality traits to specific, momentary measures of personality states. While differences between-people are important, studies have shown that differences between people are less than the variation in individual behavior from moment to moment (Noftle & Fleeson, 2009). For example, people may be very extraverted in one moment and very quiet the next moment—for extraverts and introverts alike. Whole Trait Theory proposes that these fluctuations in personality states are caused by external factors, such as changes in situations, or internal factors, such as changes in motivation.

One specific part of Whole Trait Theory is the Specific States and Function Hypothesis (SSFH; McCabe & Fleeson, 2012). The SSFH (Figure 1) proposes that changes in personality states are caused by changes in relevant context-specific goals that people are pursuing in a given moment. The personality state serves as the process or means by which people pursue their goals. As personality states change, they also cause subsequent changes in relevant outcomes (e.g., state extraversion increasing state positive affect; Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002).
person’s underlying personality trait may play a role in this underlying process, but the primary emphasis and crux of this model is the contextual relations between goals and states. From this specific trait manifestation (i.e., one’s personality state), one’s average level of goal pursuit could be used to infer one’s personality trait.

Within this work, I explored the principles behind the SSFH in different ways. Chapter 2 was a direct extension of the original work done by McCabe and Fleeson (2012), testing goal-state relations in extraversion and conscientiousness. Chapter 3 investigates the relations between the Big Five personality traits and context-specific achievement goals. Chapter 4 considers personality states beyond the Big Five with the development and validation of the State Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (SMPS). Finally, Chapter 5 tested whether the SSFH applied to new concepts, specific whether achievement goals related to changes in state perfectionism. While these studies may appear to be quite different, they all tap into the same underlying theoretical construct outlined in the SSFH. As such, the following sections will explain the different trait and motive concepts presented throughout this work.

### Personality Traits

The trait concept is commonly defined as “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 2003, p. 25). They are latent structures inherent to individuals, and they are reflected in one’s behavior. There have been many different approaches and theories of personality traits throughout the history of psychology, such as the “neuropsychic structures” proposed by Gordon Allport (1937). From this tradition, personality psychologists have tried to answer the big question of the number of traits that describe the person as a whole, which is reflected in popular models such as the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1985; Goldberg, 1981), the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2009), and the Big Eight (De Raad, & Barelds, 2008). However, some specific personality traits, including perfectionism, (Hewitt & Flett, 2002), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988), can be useful beyond the broad scope of the Big Five. These specific traits can describe important individual differences that may predict important behavioral
outcomes. Within this work, we explore both the broad scope of the entire Big Five (Chapter 3), specific personality states within the Big Five (extraversion and conscientiousness; Chapter 2), and the specific individual difference of trait and state perfectionism (Chapters 4 and 5).

The Big Five

One prominent trait approach proposed and developed in the 1980’s was the “Big Five” model (Goldberg, 1981) or the Five-Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1985). These models have subtle differences, but they both conceptualize personality into five fundamental factors: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Over the past few decades, support for the Big Five model has increased, which includes longitudinal studies (McCrae et al., 2000; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006) and cross-cultural studies (McCrae et al., 2000; Saucier & Ostendorf, 1999). Moreover, each of these traits has been found to predict important life outcomes, including happiness, job satisfaction, and life expectancy (for a review, see Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006).

The Big Five is commonly used to measure one’s personality as a whole. It also has a clear hierarchical structure from which subcomponents (i.e., facets) are organized (Paunonen, 1998). The subcomponents are highly correlated parts of a trait, and like the Big Five, there have been numerous proposals of the number and qualities of these facets (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). Therefore, to understand more specific relations between traits and motives, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 each feature not only Big Five traits, but also the subcomponents of these traits.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is defined as a personality trait in which a person strives to be flawless in his or her actions (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Research in the early 1990’s advanced this concept by moving from a single dimension to a multidimensional trait structure (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) that encompasses specific facets of this broader trait. These dimensions of perfectionism are related to the broader framework of the Big Five, relating to both conscientiousness and neuroticism (Dunkley & Kyparissis, 2008; Rice, Ashby, &
Several theories have outlined different perfectionism facets, each theory with its respective approach to measurement (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney et al., 2001). Despite ongoing debate regarding perfectionism facets, there is growing consensus that there are positive, adaptive facets of perfectionism and negative, maladaptive facets of perfectionism (Gaudreau, 2012; Stoeber & Otto, 2006), supported by how the facets related to positive outcomes, such as achievement and positive affect, and to negative outcomes, such as stress, and anxiety. In this work, I utilized the three dimensions proposed by Frost and colleagues (1990): personal standards, doubts about actions, and concern over mistakes. All of these dimensions are discussed in further detail in later chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

**Goals**

A goal can be defined as “a cognitive representation of a future object that the organism is committed to approach or avoid” (Elliot & Fryer, 2008). Breaking down this definition, goal pursuit is a process that involves strategy development (cognitive representation), commitment to action (goal commitment), and attainment of an end-state (future object). In its most basic process, goal pursuit results in either accomplishing or not accomplishing a goal. The process becomes more complex when other factors are added, such as conflicting goals or personal characteristics.

There have been many theories that have defined and organized different goal constructs, particularly in the 1980’s (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996 for a review). These concepts can encompass a broad range in time—to specific desires in a given moment to life-long pursuits. These goal constructs can also vary in specificity, in which some concepts are concrete and specific, while other concepts are vague and abstract. Due to this wide range in conceptual content and measurement, goal research is often investigated within the scope of the specific concept of the study.

Within this entire work, we focused on context-specific goals, or goals that are pursued within a given moment in time. By investigating goals in context, we identified potential processes by
which goals and traits interact. Chapter 2 introduces hypothesized momentary goals developed from the Specific States and Function Hypothesis (SSFH), which is an extension of previous work by McCabe and Fleeson (2012). The remaining chapters explore connections between traits and goals by utilizing a well-established goal concept and goal framework: achievement goals.

**Achievement goals**

The achievement goal construct emerged from decades of research into the different motives people have in achievement settings (Elliot, 2005). Initially, the primary emphasis of achievement goals was on two types of achievement goals: mastery and performance goals (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). The fundamental difference in these goal types is how individuals define their competence in a given achievement situation. Specifically, mastery goals use task-referenced and self-referenced competence standards, whereas performance goals are grounded in other-referenced competence standards. In the past two decades, the achievement goal framework has been expanded to account for goal valence, emphasizing that people strive to approach competence and to avoid incompetence. The two definitions of competence (master and performance) and the two types of valence (approach and avoidance) converged in the $2 \times 2$ achievement goal framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Recently, this framework expanded to the $3 \times 2$ achievement goal framework, which split the mastery definition into two definitions (self and task) and maintained the performance definition (now called “other”; Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011). Both frameworks were utilized in this work: Chapter 3 utilized the $2 \times 2$ framework, and Chapter 5 utilized part of the $3 \times 2$ framework. As such, each of these individual goal concepts are defined and discussed in further detail in each of these chapters.

**Bridging the Divide: Research on Trait-Goal relations**

When comparing traits and goals, they conceptually appear to be somewhat distinct from each other. Trait describe how people are acting, thinking, and feeling, while goals refer to specific cognitions of end-states that have yet to be attained. Traits have no active comparative element (either the presence or absence of a trait), while goals involve comparing one’s present
state to a desired or undesired end-state. Trait theory has yet to provide accounts of traits processes, whereas goals are inherently process-based concepts.

Different investigations into trait-goal relations in the last couple of decades have started to bridge this divide, many researchers proposing different processes by which goals and traits are related. Many theories outline a causal process, in which traits or temperaments cause different types of goal pursuit (McCrae & Costa, 1999; Elliot & Thrash, 2002, 2010; Little, Lecci & Watkinson, 1992). Other theories propose that both traits and goals are independent but critical concepts of personality at different levels (Corker, Oswald, & Donnellan, 2012; McAdams, 1995) or the same level (Roberts & Robins, 2000; Roberts & Wood, 2006). Recently, Whole Trait Theory (Fleeson, 2012) integrated the trait and goal concepts together, asserting that manifestations of traits can be used to achieve an individual’s goals (McCabe & Fleeson, 2012; Chapter 2). Each of these theoretical approaches have merit, and research continues to explore how best to connect the trait and goal concepts.

The theoretical approach presented in this work reflects the Specific States and Functions Hypothesis (Figure .11). While the model does include the traditional approach of personality traits predicting changes in goal pursuit, the crux of the model is the path between contextual goal pursuit and personality states. This specific path presents a way in which personality states can be used to achieve one’s goals in a specific moment. As such, the aggregate of these personality states can be used to infer the broader personality trait as a whole. Each chapter below tests paths of this model through various methods and constructs.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2
Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical concept behind this thesis—the Specific States and Function Hypothesis (SSFH). This concept builds upon an initial investigation by McCabe and Fleeson (2012), showing that specific momentary goals had strong relations to changes in state extraversion. Chapter 2 extended this work by exploring the trait-goal relations of extraversion
Specific States and Function Hypothesis Model

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.1.** The following figure shows the model and the different paths explored throughout this work. These paths are as follows:

- **Chapter 2:** Path b (momentary goals, state extraversion, & state conscientiousness).
- **Chapter 3:** Path a (Big Five traits & achievement goals).
- **Chapter 4:** Paths a, d, & c (State perfectionism scale).
- **Chapter 5:** Paths b, c, & e (achievement goals & state perfectionism).

and conscientiousness. It also tested the SSFH in two key ways. First, an experiment tested the causal direction of the relation between personality states and momentary goals. Second, Chapter 2 highlighted whether observer reports reflect the same goal-state relations as self-reports.

**Chapter 3**

One of the critiques of the SSFH is that it tests goals that are generated by the researchers, and as such, may only be a metric of the same underlying latent construct. While there is evidence that participants do discriminate between trait items and goal items (McCabe & Fleeson, 2012), another way to explore whether goals and traits are related is to utilize and incorporate existing goal frameworks. As such, the studies in Chapter 3 explore the relations of the Big Five personality traits and the context-specific goals of the 2 x 2 achievement goal framework. The two studies investigate trait-goal relations in an educational context with a U.S. sample and in an organizational context with a Dutch sample.

**Chapter 4**

Instead of solely investigating the SSFH within the Big Five framework, we wanted to test whether the basic theoretical principle behind the SSFH (i.e., whether personality states...
function as a means to achieve one’s goals) could apply to personality traits outside the scope and the measurement of the Big Five. Our focus is on the specific trait of perfectionism—a trait with multiple dimensions that have been shown to be related to achievement goals (Stoeber, Stoll, Pescheck, & Otto, 2008; Stoeber et al., 2009). The purpose was to test whether momentary levels of perfectionism, or state perfectionism, would be related to context-specific achievement goals. Moreover, we wanted to investigate whether this relation would also be relevant in achievement processes.

With no standardized scale of state perfectionism in the literature, the studies in Chapter 4 presented the development and validation of the State Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (SMPS). The items were derived from existing trait perfectionism items, and it can be changed to adapt to different achievement domains (e.g., work, school, and sport).

**Chapter 5**

With the SMPS outlined and developed in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 tested whether achievement goals are related to state perfectionism, and whether these goal-state relations are meaningful in achievement processes. We outlined a mediation model derived from SSFH, which tests whether achievement goals predict changes in performance and state affect through state perfectionism.