The role of personality in the pursuit of context-specific goals
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“Personality is less a finished product than a transitory process. While it has some stable features, it is at the same time continually undergoing change.” –Gordon Allport (1955, p. 19).

Gordon Allport (1937) popularized the trait approach, and his work helped establish a foundation for the development and advancement of the Big Five model of personality research. However, a common criticism of Allport’s definition of traits, as noted in the quotation above, is that personality is viewed as a constant, unchanging construct. In fact, this criticism was raised by David McClelland, who asserted that Allport’s trait goes beyond describing consistent behavior “to account for inconsistencies in behavior, new responses which seem primarily determined by the person’s wishes or goals, rather than by his past adjustment in similar situations” (1958, p. 214). This criticism was advanced by Walter Mischel (1968), sparking the person-situation debate that persisted between personality psychology and social psychology for decades. Researchers now are moving beyond the person-situation debate to recognize the importance of both the person and the situation, returning to earlier ideas from both Gordon Allport and Kurt Lewin. In the quote above, Allport (1955) recognized that personality develops and changes over time in a process, although this process was not clear at the time. Relatedly, Kurt Lewin (1936) asserted that behavior is a function of both the person and the environment. To fully explore psychological processes, both the environment and the person should be integrated into research questions.

This work served as one specific way to integrate personality and environment through the investigation of the relations between personality and context-specific goal pursuit. Whole Trait Theory (Fleeson, 2012) is one possible theoretical approach by which integration of person and situations may occur, and the Specific States and Functions Hypothesis (SSFH) hypothesizes specific ways in which goals can predict and change behavior. The research presented in this
work explored how traits and motives were related through the investigation of momentary goals in relation to both the holistic Big Five model and the specific personality trait of perfectionism. This work also explored processes by which personality may function through the adoption of goals, from social and hedonistic goals (Chapter 2) and achievement goal pursuit (Chapter 3 and Chapter 5). The core principle—the relations between personality and context-specific goals—was the main thread present throughout this work, and these relations appear to be common across constructs, domains, culture, and language. Personality and goals should be considered important interrelated constructs in accordance with SSFH.

Summary of Main Findings

Chapter 2
The studies in Chapter 2 provided a direct extension of work conducted by McCabe and Fleeson (2012). Utilizing experience-sampling methodology in Study 1, I found that eight hypothesized goals predicted half the variance in state extraversion and eight new hypothesized goals predicted half the variance in state conscientiousness. These hypothesized goals included both approach and avoidance directions, and the goals predicted both positive and negative relations with each state. I also found in Study 1 that personality states had distinct relations with goals with little to no overlap, which suggests that the reason why state extraversion and state conscientiousness differ is due to the distinct types of goal pursuit.

Study 2 provided a critical test for the Specific States and Functions Hypothesis. In an experimental design, I found that the effect of goal pursuit on personality states was causal. Prior work only suggested that traits predict changes in goals, but this experiment provided evidence that goals in part could cause changes to personality states in a specific moment. Lastly, the results of Study 3 showed that relations between goals and personality states were present even by observer reports.

Taken as a whole, these studies showed that traits are intricately related to motivation. Goal pursuit predicted manifestation for two different traits, one easy to see as goal-related
(conscientiousness) and one not so easy to see as goal-related (extraversion). Extraversion manifestations provided the means for accomplishing the goals of trying to become the center of attention, trying to fit in, and trying to have fun, among other goals; conscientiousness manifestations provided the means for trying to direct one’s energy where it was needed most, trying to use time effectively, and for trying to get things done, among other goals. Goals predicted manifestations discriminatively, such that goals predicted only their corresponding traits and had little or no relation to non-corresponding traits. Thus, these findings provided strong evidence for a conception of traits in which traits are wholes with an explanatory part inclusive of goals and a manifested part caused by and useful for goals.

Chapter 3
Chapter 3 provided an initial test of the relations between Big Five traits and achievement goals. The key findings from our studies are that there are three consistent sets of relations between personality traits and achievement goals. Interestingly, it is not merely one's level of conscientiousness that predicts all achievement goals—rather different traits are relevant for different types of goals. Across two different samples (a U.S. college student sample and a Dutch working adult sample) in terms of culture, language, age, and context, we found generally consistent relations between personality traits and achievement goals, and the patterns of these relations are unique for each achievement goal. The trait-goal relations indicated that mastery-approach goals are clearly positive and performance-avoidance goals are clearly negative, while both performance-approach and mastery-avoidance goals showed a hybrid of positive and negative qualities in their trait-goal relations. Moreover, facet-goal relations in Study 2 showed the specific aspects relevant to the broad trait-goal relations, either in a few specific facets or several facets across the whole trait. Taken together, these findings suggest complexity in the relations between holistic personality traits and context-specific achievement goals, which may serve to explain differences in achievement goal processes and outcomes.
Chapter 4
Chapter 4 introduced the concept of state perfectionism, and outlined the rationale for its measurement. Rather than having separate trait perfectionism scales for each domain (e.g., work, school, and sport), the State Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale adapted existing trait perfectionism items to be monetary and general in language to apply across domains. A prepositional phrase at the end of these items can specify certain times (e.g., “in the last 30 minutes”) or a certain context (e.g., “on the exam”). Across a series of five studies, the results showed that the SMPS is a reliable measure with structural and conceptual validity. The measurement of state perfectionism in specific contexts allows researchers to investigate perfectionism processes previously unexplored.

Chapter 5
Chapter 5 tested different paths to successful performance through achievement goal pursuit. The results from these studies provide compelling and complex processes in which people strive for success. First, the results provided support for our model, which shows that state perfectionism is an important mediator of the relations between achievement goals and achievement outcomes. While research on trait perfectionism and achievement goals has increased steadily over the past decade, this focus limits the potential variability of perfectionism in specific contexts. The inclusion of state perfectionism in an achievement goal process adds unique elements to the literature. First, state perfectionism implies that anyone—regardless of their dispositional trait level of perfectionism—can be perfectionistic in certain contexts. Moreover, these momentary levels of perfectionism are related to performance and affect. Study 2 provided support that when high personal standards is induced, it can cause changes in performance.

Theoretical and Practical Research Applications
Theoretical applications of this work are quite clear. The chapters are rooted in While Trait Theory (Fleeson, 2012; McCabe & Fleeson, 2012), and the tests of the trait and goal-state relations are direct tests of the Specific States and Functions Hypothesis (SSFH). Moreover, this
work tested various trait-goal relations beyond the original scope of the SSFH, by exploring relations between Big Five traits and achievement goals (Chapter 3) and perfectionism relations with achievement goals (Chapter 5). These studies serve to bridge a previously large theoretical gap between trait and goal traditions, providing clear psychological processes by which context-specific goal pursuit can change personality states.

There are also numerous practical applications of this research. Context-specific goals are relevant across a range of domains—inside the classroom, on the sports arena, and in the workplace. In particular, the processes involved in achievement motivation are critical as people attempt ways to improve and to maximize performance, as well as understanding the possible costs and benefits of different types of achievement goal pursuit (e.g., state positive affect and state negative affect). For example, the pursuit of mastery-approach goals and performance-approach goals may share some processes.

Beyond performance improvement, the SSFH may also provide a means for people to change their personality over time. People are often searching for ways to improve or change their behavior, such as trying a new time management routine to improve efficiency or trying a new exercise routine to improve health. The process of SSFH may identify the goals that if people choose to adopt, they potentially could change their behavior over time. Roberts, O’Donnell, and Robins (2004) provided evidence that major life goals could change personality over a four-year period. However, I would stress that this work only investigated short-term goal-state relations, and there is only one test goal causing changes in momentary personality states (Chapter 2); therefore, generalizing these findings to long-term personality change is only speculative at this point. Moreover, there may be additional constraints on how much people could change their personality, such as one’s underlying genetics on their personality traits. Also, as personality development and fluctuation appears to occur mainly in childhood and adolescence, these constraints may be an underlying part of development. More research needs to be done to understand how personality develops and changes over the lifespan.
Directions for Future Research

Goal-State Relations & the Entire Big Five
The studies presented in this work covered an array of constructs related to relations between personality and context-specific goal pursuit, which leaves open many different directions for future research. One clear direction is to apply the SSFH to the rest of the Big Five traits. Chapter 2 found goal-state relations for extraversion and conscientiousness, which are two traits (and facet structures) that have been extensively researched within personality psychology. The remaining three traits—agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism (i.e., emotional stability)—will likely be a more challenging test of the SSFH model. Particularly, there is a question of why someone would intentionally engage in neurotic behavior in a given moment. In this case, it is likely that goal-state relations reflect emotional stability, such as being calm or self-assured. There is also a possibility that hypothesized neuroticism functions will be predominantly avoidance goals in line with work on approach-avoidance temperament (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; 2010). Nonetheless, further tests of possible goal-state relations to the rest of the Big Five should continue in the future.

Achievement Goal & Personality States
Another line of work should further investigate the relations between achievement goals and the Big Five personality states. Our work in Chapter 3 was essentially the foundational step before investigating goal-state relations. Chapter 3 was important because it identified the specific relations and the specific traits that should be explored in a follow-up study of goal-states. A one-time measurement of achievement goals and personality states would be a logical first step to test if the trait-goal relations in Chapter 3 reflect the same pattern of results as goal-state relations.

An eventual follow-up study of Chapter 3 should be an experience-sampling study in different achievement domains, such in school, work, or sport. The stability and change of achievement goals is an area of research that still needs more attention (Fryer & Elliot, 2007). However, unlike the experience-sampling study of goals and states presented in Chapter 2, an experience-
sampling study of achievement goals poses some unique challenges that should be considered before any future research is attempted. First, achievement goals in the 3 x 2 framework are more constrained by context, and therefore a time-based method of reporting (e.g., filling out a questionnaire 5 times a day for 10 days) may not be the best way to measure achievement goals over time. Rather, an event-sampling method may be a better option. This method requires participants to identify a specific context relevant for the report—such as immediately following a class, an athletic team practice, or a meeting in the workplace. However, compliance rates with event-sampling are not always the best (Reis & Gable, 2000). Second, unlike the goals measured in Chapter 2, achievement goals involve an active evaluation and comparison to competence (task-referenced, self-referenced, or other-referenced). Therefore, the achievement context should ensure that all types of competence information are available. For example, a classroom context that primarily consists of lectures and limited interaction with other students may reduce performance goal pursuit due to lack of other-referenced information. Despite these challenges, an experience-sampling study of achievement goals would be an interesting examination of the stability and change of achievement goals over time, as well as its potential relations to personality states across these different domains.

**State Perfectionism Concept and Variability**

Additional research is also needed on state perfectionism. Chapter 4 outlined the concept of state perfectionism and presented the State Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (SMPS). Chapter 5 also utilized this concept and scale, showing support for relations between achievement goals and state perfectionism. However, there were a few limitations with the development of the SMPS. First, the SMPS included only intrapersonal perfectionism constructs. As discussed in Chapter 4, part of this reason was due to simplicity—it is easier for participants to reflect on their own personality state in a given moment rather than interpreting other’s perfectionistic standards in a given moment. Also, as many of our tests in Chapter 4 were laboratory tasks, the relevance of a parent or peer’s perfectionistic standards did not appear relevant, which could influence reliability and validity analyses when developing a scale.
Still, an extension of the SMPS to measure interpersonal perfectionism standards would be an important extension that ties back into the trait perfectionism literature (Gaudreau, 2012).

Another unanswered question regarding state perfectionism is its level of variability over time. An underlying assumption of this work was that state perfectionism would have similar trait-state characteristics as the Big Five traits in past research (Fleeson, 2001). However, there is also a reasonable assertion that perfectionism may not change that much over time and across different contexts. It is also possible that certain facets of state perfectionism may have more variability than others. Intrapersonal facets, such as state personal standards and state concern over mistakes, may change more frequently depending upon a person’s situation, goal, cognitions, and so on. However, interpersonal facets of perfectionism, such as perceptions of parents’ high standards or a coach’s high standards, may be less flexible across different contexts. Only a repeated-measure or an experience-sampling study using the SMPS can assess the full within-persona and between-person variance in state perfectionism.

**Concluding Remarks**

The theoretical framework presented in this work served to bridge two concepts that have been theoretically separate for decades—traits and motives. Since the days of Allport and Murray, a debate has persisted whether traits or motives are central to one’s personality and subsequent behavior. The Specific States and Functions Hypothesis (McCabe & Fleeson, 2012; Chapter 2) covered in this work proposed that personality states, or manifestations of a personality trait, are the means by which people try to achieve their goal pursuit. As such, personality and context-specific goals are interconnected in a specific process. The work presented here provides strong support for goal-state relations, and it opens the door to explore the complex behavioral processes that integrate both personality and contextual goal pursuit.