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## Social cognitive predictors of academic adjustment and life satisfaction in Portuguese college students: A longitudinal analysis <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

A social cognitive model of well-being [Lent, R. W. (2004). Toward a unifying theoretical and practical perspective on well-being and psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 51*, 482–509.] was adapted to the context of academic adjustment and tested using a longitudinal design. Participants were 252 students at a university in northern Portugal. They completed measures of academic self-efficacy, environmental support, goal progress, and adjustment, along with global measures of positive affect and life satisfaction. Path analyses indicated that the model fit the data well overall. As expected, self-efficacy and environmental support were predictive of goal progress and academic adjustment, and the latter was predictive of students' global life satisfaction. Self-efficacy and positive affect were found to be reciprocally related to one another. Contrary to expectations, goal progress did not contribute uniquely to the prediction of academic adjustment or life satisfaction. We consider directions for future research applying the social cognitive model to satisfaction in, and adjustment to, educational and work settings.

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### 1. Introduction

In an effort to extend the study of subjective well-being (SWB) to vocational and counseling psychology, Lent (2004) recently proposed a unifying theoretical approach to domain and life satisfaction. This approach draws upon inquiry on both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives on well-being and includes cognitive (e.g., goals), behavioral (e.g., participation in valued life tasks), social (e.g., support), and trait-affective elements (Brunstein, 1993; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Lent and Brown (2006, 2008) later extended Lent's general unifying approach to the specific domains of educational and work satisfaction. This theoretical effort incorporates key elements of social cognitive theory, which has proven to be a versatile framework in the study of adaptive processes and positive adjustment (Bandura, 1997, 2001). The educational and vocational extensions of the well-being model are also designed to complement the previously developed interest, choice, and performance models of social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

According to the unifying model of well-being, domain-specific adjustment (e.g., satisfaction and functioning in educational and work settings) and overall SWB (e.g., general satisfaction with life) are jointly determined by cognitive, behavioral,

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social, and personality variables. In keeping with social cognitive assumptions, this approach highlights aspects of positive functioning over which people can exercise agency (e.g., the setting and pursuit of personal goals, involvement in valued life tasks, building social supports). However, it also acknowledges factors (e.g., personality dispositions) that may be more resistant to personal agency and traditional approaches to counseling.

Lent's (2004) theoretical framework contains two interrelated models, one aimed at the experience of well-being under normative life conditions and the other focusing on the recovery of well-being subsequent to stressful or traumatic life events. The purpose of the current study was to test a version of the former (normative well-being) model within a sample of Portuguese college students. The basic normative well-being model is displayed in Fig. 1. According to this model, overall life satisfaction is influenced by certain personality variables (e.g., trait positive and negative affect), satisfaction in one's central life domains (e.g., work, family), participation in valued life tasks, and progress at fulfilling salient personal goals.

Domain satisfaction, one of the precursors of overall life satisfaction, is seen as partly determined by personality factors, but is also posited to be affected by agentic, social cognitive mechanisms, in particular, goal-directed activity, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental supports and resources. In other words, in addition to benefiting from particular traits (Diener et al., 1999), people are more likely to be satisfied within a given life domain when they actively pursue and make progress at personally valued goals (Brunstein, 1993); feel competent at the tasks required for successful performance and goal pursuit (Bandura, 1997); anticipate the receipt of favorable outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 2002); and perceive their environment as supportive and as offering resources to enable their goal pursuit (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999). Both for theoretical reasons and because of their assumed relevance to preventive and therapeutic interventions, the model is also concerned with the nature of the relations among the social cognitive precursors of domain satisfaction. For instance, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are each assumed to be influenced by the availability of goal-relevant environmental supports and resources.

Given the newness of the generic framework of domain and life satisfaction (Lent, 2004) and its extension to the more specific adjustment contexts of academic and work satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2006), this approach has thus far received limited empirical study. A few recent studies have, however, tested the normative well-being model. Lent, Singley et al. (2005) reported two studies in which the model fit the data well within general samples of college students, helping to explain satisfaction in particular life domains (academics, social life) and in general. In both studies, progress at personal goals was a reliable predictor of domain satisfaction which, in turn, predicted overall life satisfaction. Lent, Singley, Sheu, Schmidt, and Schmidt (2007) also found good support for the model in accounting for academic satisfaction in a sample of engineering students. In most of the model tests, domain self-efficacy and/or environmental supports (but not outcome expectations) also contributed to domain satisfaction.

The present study was designed to extend the nascent line of research on the normative well-being model in several ways. First, each of the published studies on this model has used a cross-sectional design. Such a design is helpful in exploring concurrent relations among the theoretical variables but is not able to test the temporal predominance of the relations posited by the model (e.g., in order to support the assumption that goal progress leads to domain satisfaction, the former must precede the latter in time). In the present study we used a longitudinal design to examine the nature of the temporal relations among the variables, as specified by the theory.

Second, prior studies in this line of research have focused only on the prediction of domain and life satisfaction. Lent (2004) had advocated a multicomponent view of positive adjustment which includes other indicators of optimal functioning, such as satisfactory role performance and low levels of stress in central life domains, in addition to one's experience of domain and life satisfaction. We, therefore, operationalized positive adjustment in this study as a combination of satisfaction, stress, and academic functioning outcomes. Third, existing model tests have all involved US college students. The present study examined the degree to which the model might help explain educational adjustment outcomes among college

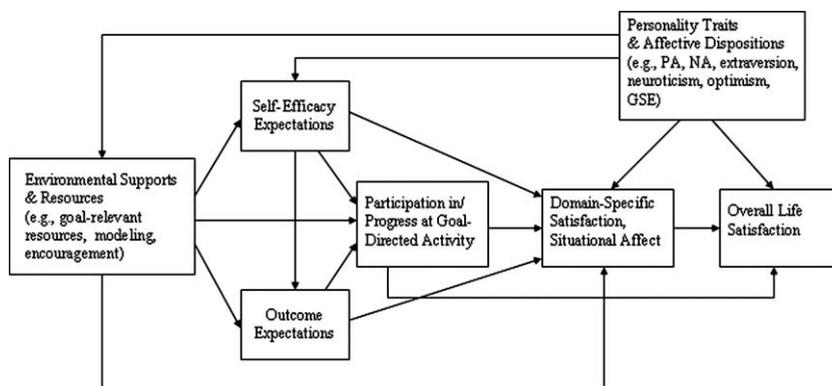


Fig. 1. Integrative model depicting personality, affective, and social-cognitive contributors to well-being under normative life conditions. From "Toward a Unifying Theoretical and Practical Perspective on Well-Being and Psychosocial Adjustment," by R.W. Lent, 2004, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51, p. 500. Reprinted with permission. PA, positive affect; NA, negative affect; GSE, generalized self-efficacy.

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