



Personal projects, life stories, and happiness: On being true to traits [☆]

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Abstract

In three studies (Ns between 125 and 176), happiness in life was the highest for undergraduates whose personal goals and life-story identities were supported by thematically consistent personality traits. In Study 1, happiness was highest among participants who were pursuing highly social goals that were supported by sociable traits. This relation between trait–goal consistency and happiness was partially mediated by perceptions of goal manageability. In Study 2, happiness was highest among participants who had highly social life-story identities that were supported by sociable traits. Study 3 replicated the main results of Studies 1 and 2 and also found a significant relation between the extent to which participants' goals and life-story identities were social in theme.

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1. Introduction

“my advice to you is to start drinking heavily” (Bluto, 1978)

In 1978, John Belushi’s character, Bluto, caricatured college debauchery and disregard for academics in *National Lampoon’s Animal House*. Life in Bluto’s fraternity revolved around lazy camaraderie with pals, thinking up ways to generate intimate encounters with the opposite sex, and spontaneous fun without regard for academic consequences. Instant gratification, toga parties, drunken antics, and food fights were the goals of happy existence. Highly conscientious bookworms were ridiculed as nerdy dweebs who failed to understand the true purpose of college life. The exaggerated theme in *Animal House* captures a pervasive social norm that continues to prescribe carefree partying and easy-going sociability as an important part of the undergraduate experience, even at the most academically demanding universities (Cantor, Acker, & Cook-Flannagan, 1992; Prentice & Miller, 1993). The present research investigates how happiness in pursuit of undergraduate social goals depends on undergraduates’ personalities. Put simply, we expected that trying to be highly social in the undergraduate social context would be easiest and most rewarding for students who were relatively extraverted, agreeable, and not too conscientious. They would be most constitutionally equipped to adapt and respond to the party-themed social norms and affordances that characterize the undergraduate social ecology.

2. Sociable traits (ST) in the undergraduate social ecology

From the perspective of Five Factor Theory (McCrae & Costa, 1999) personality traits such as Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness are biologically rooted *basic tendencies*. Although underlying neural or hormonal mechanisms are yet to be fully specified, behavioral genetics research on similarities among twins raised together and in different environments shows an impressive role of heredity in shaping traits (e.g., Riemann, Angleitner, & Strelau, 1997; Tellegen et al., 1988). The cross-cultural similarities and temporal stability of traits (McCrae et al., 2000) are consistent with the view that they are foundational, change-resistant, basic tendencies. In contrast, *characteristic adaptations*, such as personal goals and identities, are more malleable, cognitively elaborated orientations toward acting and being in the world. The usually modest correlation between basic tendencies and characteristic adaptation themes (Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992; McGregor, 1997; Roberts & Robins, 2000) is consistent with the contention that characteristic adaptations are not wholly shaped by basic tendencies. Accordingly, the partial independence of personal goals and identities from personality traits allows for a test of our main hypothesis, that happiness should be highest for individuals with goals and identities that are supported by thematically consistent traits.

We propose that trait-consistent goals feel intrinsically enjoyable and manageable, and that the manageability feeds forward to further enjoyment and ultimately, to happiness (cf. McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). Imagine a

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