



# Individual differences in mixed emotions moderate the negative consequences of goal conflict on life purpose



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## ABSTRACT

Pursuing two incompatible goals (goal conflict) is commonly viewed as pernicious for individual well-being. Recent research has also shown that sometimes goal conflict instigates the experience of mixed emotions (co-activation of positive and negative emotions), and in turn, mixed emotions has been linked to some beneficial outcomes, including self-control and eudaimonic well-being. In the present study we formulated mixed emotions as an individual difference, and hypothesized that individual differences in mixed emotions can moderate the relationship between goal conflict and life purpose, a dimension of eudaimonic well-being. A sample of 73 individuals participated in an experience sampling study, producing over 2500 observations. Moderation analysis using multilevel modeling showed that goal conflict was negatively related to life-purpose, but more importantly this effect was qualified by a significant cross-level interaction, such that the negative effect of goal conflict on life purpose was weaker for individuals who commonly experienced greater mixed emotions. Given that conflicting goals are commonplace, experiencing mixed emotions may be beneficial for individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

Accrued evidence has shown that goal conflict impairs well-being (Emmons & King, 1988), increases physical symptomatology and GP visits (King & Emmons, 1991), and can prompt depression and anxiety (Emmons & King, 1988). Theory concerning goal conflict also suggests that it is the inability to resolve goal conflict that crucially explains the negative consequences of goal-conflict on well-being (Emmons, 1996).

Recent research has demonstrated that goal-conflict is sometimes followed by emotional experiences characterized by the co-activation of both positive and negative emotions, which are referred to as mixed emotions (Berrios, Totterdell, & Kellett, 2015a). Particularly important in this regard is some theory indicating that mixed emotions are complex emotional experiences that may facilitate the integration of incompatible strands of information in a given moment (Cacioppo, Larsen, Smith, & Berntson, 2004; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1996; Zautra, 2003), such as in situations involving personal dilemmas (Schniter, Sheremeta, & Shields, 2015).

Other studies have also shown that mixed emotions can promote well-being (Hershfield, Scheibe, Sims, & Carstensen, 2013), but have yet to specify the context within which mixed emotions may be

beneficial. Indeed, some authors (e.g., Hershfield et al., 2013) have acknowledged that the mechanisms that explain how feeling mixed emotions are good for individuals are not well understood; whilst some recent research has produced inconclusive evidence, showing either positive (Brose, Voelkle, Lövdén, Linderberger, & Schmiedek, 2015) or null associations (Grühn, Lumley, Diehl, & Labouvie-Vief, 2013) between mixed emotions and eudaimonic well-being.

Thus, it is unclear how or under which circumstances mixed emotions may favor individual well-being. Drawing on the dynamic model of affect (DMA; Reich, Zautra, & Davis, 2003; Zautra, 2003), in the present research we suggest that the individual tendency to experience greater levels of subjective mixed emotions (referred to herein as SME) during goal-conflict may positively influence life purpose. The rationale behind this mechanism is that positive and negative features of goal-conflict events are accessible and integrated more easily (cf. Cacioppo et al., 2004; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1996; Zautra, 2003) by individuals who tend to experience greater mixed emotions when goals conflict, offering benefits compared to feeling only positive or negative emotions.

Interestingly, mixed emotions have been previously linked to experiencing meaningful endings, such as graduation day (e.g., Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008), which permits us to speculate a mechanism linking SME and the specific dimension of life purpose of eudaimonic well-being. We consider that life purpose is an appropriate proxy of eudaimonic well-being in the context of goal conflict because goal conflict is theoretically seen as impairing the sense of

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meaning in life (Hirsh, 2012). Therefore, individuals who, on average, tend to experience greater SME when conflicting goals occur may tend to simultaneously access the rewarding features and negative consequences of mutually incompatible goals, achieving a more purposeful life.

### 1.1. Mixed emotions as an individual difference

Mixed emotions can be defined as an individual difference such that some individuals tend to experience greater or more frequent subjective mixed emotions in everyday life (Barford & Smillie, 2016). Rafaeli, Rogers, and Revelle (2007) investigated whether the experience of mixed emotions can be understood as an individual difference. Individual differences in mixed emotions were inferred from within person correlations between energetic arousal and tense arousal, over and above other personality dimensions of affect (i.e., positive or negative mood). Across five experience sampling studies, they found that the average within person correlation between positive and negative affect was close to zero, nonetheless, this average was qualified by large and stable individual differences identified via the random-effect coefficients in the studies.

These findings were replicated in another study (Wilt, Funkhouser, & Revelle, 2011), which also observed individual differences in mixed emotions for pleasant and unpleasant affect. Furthermore, they determined that individual differences in mixed emotions, for both energetic-tense and pleasant-unpleasant pairs, was predicted by a tendency to flexibly perceive threatening and pleasant situations as occurring together.

In sum, personality differences in the tendency to experience mixed emotions are consistently observed and are well-related to common personality constructs. These findings can be interpreted as suggesting that mixed emotions moderate the negative consequences of difficult or stressful situations (Wilt et al., 2011). This is consistent with theory suggesting that mixed emotions may facilitate the integration of conflicting information in a given moment (Cacioppo et al., 2004; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1996; Zautra, 2003). This is also supported by research evidencing that dialectical thinkers (i.e., individuals who integrate both positive and negative aspects during complex situations) tend to experience greater levels of mixed emotions in everyday life, regardless of the type of ongoing life event (i.e., positive or negative events; Hui, Fok, & Bond, 2009).

Contrasting with the aforementioned literature, we conceptualize mixed emotions as a subjective experience, measured using daily self-reports of subjective mixed emotions experience, which is later used to infer individual differences based on between-subject variations from daily scores. This is in accordance with recent research investigating individual differences in SME (Barford & Smillie, 2016).

### 1.2. Individual differences in mixed emotions and well-being

The DMA (Reich et al., 2003; Zautra, 2003) has explicitly suggested that individual differences in mixed emotions may favor individual well-being. According to this theory, positive affect and negative affect are complementary experiences during stressful events. Under high stress, information processing is concentrated on immediate demands, and as a consequence, discrimination between positive affect and negative affect is simplified, leading to negative correlations between positive affect and negative affect (Reich et al., 2003).

The DMA also anticipates that individuals who more commonly experience both positive and negative emotions during stressful situations may show positive consequences for well-being (Davis, Zautra, & Smith, 2004), because their coping responses better integrate both the threats and potential rewarding consequences of the difficult personal situations. Thus, for example, some evidence has shown that individual differences in mixed emotions are associated with greater resilience during bereavement (Coifman, Bonanno, & Rafaeli, 2007).

Contrasting with the DMA, our approach understands mixed emotions as a consequence of experiencing conflicting goals. Therefore, it is not necessary to investigate the effects of individual differences in mixed emotions on well-being during stressful situations, exclusively. This may extend the potential impact of individual differences in mixed emotions on well-being to common situations in everyday life, such as goal conflict (Köpetz, Faber, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2011).

Thus, we suggest that one potential mechanism that can explain previous research linking mixed emotions and well-being (e.g., Hershfield et al., 2013) is that the individual propensity to experience mixed emotions implies that mixed emotions are more likely to be experienced when goal conflict occurs, which in turn can benefit eudaimonic well-being, as suggested by the DMA (Zautra, 2003). In this context, we hypothesized the following:

**H1.** Goal conflict is negatively associated with the dimension of life purpose of eudaimonic well-being.

**H2.** Mixed emotions moderate the relationship between goal conflict and the dimension of life purpose of eudaimonic well-being.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Seventy-three undergraduate and postgraduate students of an English university (58 female,  $M_{age} = 20.5$  years;  $SD = 3.6$  years) participated in this experience sampling study. Participants were recruited in exchange for £10 in cash or course credits. Participants were informed that the study concerned how people manage personal goals, and how these influence their emotions and daily activities. Data collected in the present study were previously used for a different study that aimed to understand whether mixed emotions mediated the relationship between goal conflict and efforts to resist temptations<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Baseline questionnaire

Participants completed the psychological well-being scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989) to provide convergent validity for the brief measure of eudaimonic well-being used in the experience sampling period. The PWB operationalizes psychological well-being along six dimensions. Each dimension was assessed using 9-items and then averaged to create a single measure of PWB ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ;  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). All of the items were measured on a 6-point Likert-format scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

#### 2.2.2. Experience sampling measures

**2.2.2.1. Conflicting goals scale.** This scale was based on Emmons and King's (1988) instrumentality matrix. The scale comprises three items which evaluated the extent to which recent activity/activities had been in conflict with an important goal ("[this/these activity/ies] had harmful effects over a goal you've been trying to achieve"; "[this/these activity/ies] have been in conflict with a goal important for you";  $M = 2.22$ ;  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $\omega = 0.83$ ). All of the items were measured on a 5-point Likert-format scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (5).

**2.2.2.2. Subjective measure of mixed emotions (SME).** On each occasion participants completed a subjective measure of mixed emotions (Berrios et al., 2015a). This measure includes four items measuring the extent to which participants had experienced mixed emotions over the last 30-min (e.g., "I experienced contrasting emotions (positive and negative emotions)"; "I've been feeling positive or negative emotions not

<sup>1</sup> Further details are available from the first author upon request.

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