Abstract

Most research on goal conflict and well-being shows that the degree to which goals conflict with each other is detrimental to well-being and goal achievement, and that goal integration is associated with positive well-being and motivation. This association, we argue, depends on the definition of the self. For the current research, two studies examined the degree to which people define the self in terms of close relationships (termed the relational-interdependent, self-construal, or RISC) as a buffer that moderates the association between goal conflict and well-being.

Introduction

The goals people set for themselves are plans for specific actions. Sometimes achieving goals can aid the achievement of other goals. For example, the goal to get pregnant can aid the goal to start a family. Other times, goals can compete and interfere with each other. For example, the goal to “be successful at work” can conflict with the goal to “spend more time with my kids.” Most research shows that the degree to which goals conflict with each other is detrimental to one’s well-being and goal achievement. Conversely, the degree to which goals are integrated with each other in an overall goal structure is good: it is associated with positive well-being and motivation. This association, we argue, depends on the structure of the self. For some people, having goals that are inconsistent with each other indicates an ability to adapt one’s goal structure to fit various social situations and roles. For the current research, we focus on a self-definition based on one’s close relationships as an examplar of a self-structure that can buffer the negative association between goal conflict and psychological well-being.

Study 1 Method and Results

Method

Participants were 222 undergraduate (65 men, 155 women, 5 unspecified) who volunteered in exchange for extra course credit. First, they listed 10 goals they either currently working on or ones that they hoped to achieve sometime in the future, and categorized each goal as: academic, relationship, or career. Next, they completed the dependent and independent self-construal questionnaire (Cross, Sacci, & Morris, 2003) and the questionnaires. After data collection, separate correlation analyses were conducted using the mean overlap ratings for each goal and the other goals on the list (relationship Goal Overlap), and the mean overlap ratings between academic goals with the other goals on the list (Academic Goal Overlap).

Results

We tested the hypothesis by conducting a series of hierarchical regression analyses using Life Satisfaction as the dependent variable. Results revealed significant RISC X Total Goal Overlap (see Figure 1) and RISC X Academic Goal Overlap interaction effects (see Figures 2 and 3). No other results were significant.

Study 2 Method and Results

Method

Participants were 178 undergraduate (57 men, 117 women, 2 unspecified) who volunteered in exchange for extra course credit. Participants followed the same procedure as in Study 1 except they completed the questionnaires assessing the relational self-construal and life satisfaction before they listed their goals, and the goal list consisted of 7 goals. They then completed a measure of goal dependency instead of a measure of goal dependency. Goal Dependency was measured by asking participants to indicate whether or not failure to achieve individual goals impacts the ability to achieve other goals (5, No, 1=Yes). The impact scores were calculated using the equation in Zajonc (1965). Total Goal Dependency score was obtained by summing the number of 1’s in the grid then dividing by 42. Separate scores for Relationship Goal Dependency and Academic Goal Dependency were also calculated. To measure the degree to which academic goals were ranked among the 7 goals on the list, participants were first given a page with seven numbered lines. They were then asked to refer to their goal lists and rank-order their goals from 1 (highest rank) to 7 (lowest rank). The Relationship Rank scores were obtained by counting the number of relationship goals in the ranking slots 1, 2, or 3, and the Academic Rank scores were obtained by counting the number of academic goals in the ranking slots 1, 2, or 3. Thus, the ranking scores measured the number of relationship and academic goals that filled the top three ranked slots, so scores ranged from 0 to 3.

Results

We tested the hypothesis that relational self-construal moderates the relation between goal dependency and well-being by again conducting a series of hierarchical regression analyses using Life Satisfaction as the dependent variable. Results revealed significant RISC X Total Dependency and RISC X Academic Goal Dependency interaction effects (see Figures 4 and 5).

To test the hypothesis that relational self-construal moderates the association between goal ranking and well-being, we conducted a second series of hierarchical regression analyses using Life Satisfaction as the dependent variable. Results indicated significant RISC X Total Dependency X Goal Overlap interaction effect (see Figure 5). There were no other significant interaction effects.

Conclusions

People with a highly relational self-construal displayed a weak relationship between goal integration and life satisfaction, whereas the association for low relational was stronger. This effect was magnified when only academic goals were examined. High relational showed a positive association between ranking relationship goals highly and well-being, whereas low relational showed a negative association. Thus, integration of goals for high relational may not be as important to well-being as pursuing and prioritizing self-relevant goals.