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Emotional well-being can be affected by the type of goals people have, how they view their goals, and their progress toward those goals. This paper proposed that characteristics of the cognitive representations of people's personal goals, such as having goals in different life domains (goal diversity) and their level of abstraction, can have an impact on emotional well-being both independently and when a person is faced with a negative goal-related life event. To test the relationships between goal characteristics and emotional well-being, students from an introductory psychology class reported their goals at the beginning of the academic year and completed questionnaires assessing aspects of emotional well-being, including depressive symptoms and worrying. At the end of the academic year, students were asked to describe life events associated with the most stressful time during the year and rate their depressive symptoms. Goals obtained were coded to determine level of abstraction and life domain. It was hypothesized that people with more abstract goals would report lower emotional well-being. Also, the study aimed to look at how goal diversity correlated with emotional well-being. Finally, the moderating effect of goal diversity at Time 1 on the effect of a goal-related life event on emotional well-being at Time 2 was tested. Additionally, it was hypothesized that goal adjustment would interact with life categories to predict emotional well-being. Results did not support the initial hypotheses for the study. Goal diversity was not found to be correlated with negative emotional well-being or to have a moderating role on the effect of a negative life-event. However, main effects were found for GAS reengagement (β = -.15, p = .003) and number of categories (β = .12, p = .021).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOAL CHARACTERISTICS AND

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Goals (also referred to as life tasks, personal strivings, current concerns, and personal projects) are an essential part of a person's life because they are thought to reflect values and personality (Elliott & Sheldon, 1997). According to Emmons (1989), goals are the optimal way to understand an individual. The drive for people to align themselves with their core values leads to goals providing them with a sense of purpose and structure (Elliot, Sheldon & Church, 1997; Bargh, et al. 2001; Nurmi, Katariina, & Kaisa, 2009; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver & Schulz, 2003). Goal attainment or failure tends to elicit strong emotions when the goals are viewed as crucial and important (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). For this reason, progress toward the accomplishment of important personal goals leads to an increase in positive affect, life satisfaction, and emotional well-being. The opposite is also true, failure to accomplish goals then leads to lower emotional well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1986; Higgins, 1987; Sheldon and Kasser, 1998).

Since goals can be tied to a person's most important values and beliefs, people tend to organize their lives around goals that embody the person they are trying to become (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Lavallee & Campbell, 1995). Therefore, goals may be seen as the areas of life (emotion, cognition, and behavior) in which the person is most invested (Elliot et. al, 1997; Lavallee & Campbell, 1995). Behavior is therefore guided and motivated by the drive to reach these important goals. People are constantly evaluating themselves and behaving in ways to reduce the gap between their current state and their ideal goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1990; Rasmussen, Wrosch, Scheier, & Carver, 2006).

The current study examined how individual differences in the cognitive representation of goals can impact emotional well-being. Specifically, this study focused on the effect of two important goal characteristics, level of abstraction and amount of diversity among important personal goals, as well as interactions with negative life events. The paper will first review the existing literature on goal diversity, which will draw on the current debate in self-complexity research. Second, goal hierarchy theory and its impact on abstract versus concrete goal research will be discussed. Third, the paper will review the literature on negative life events that form obstacles to goal progress and accomplishment. Finally, we present data from a short-term longitudinal study of college students in which several hypotheses about the relationships among goal characteristics, life events, and emotional well-being were tested.

Cognitive Representation of Goals

Two different methods have been used in the past for assessing an individual's important personal goals. One method has been to provide participants with a standard list of goals and ask them to select or rate the goals that are most important to them (Cantor et al., 1991; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Schnelle, Brandstatter & Knopfel, 2010). Although this method has the advantage of being easy to score and administer, some researchers state this may not be the best method (Lavallee & Campbell, 1995). Furthermore, studies using goals derived by the experimenter tend to limit the list of goals to common, typical goals people hold; this method provides very little information about how people's goals are represented in their own minds.

Alternatively, many studies use participants' idiographic goals (i.e. Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997; Hadley & MacLeod, 2010; Kelly, Mansell & Wood, 2011; Lecci, Karoly, Briggs, & Kuhn, 1994; Nurmi et al., 2009; Sheldon and Kasser, 1998). Goals written by participants may be more important, salient, and specific to the life contexts participants are most invested in than

goals provided in a list (Lavalle & Campbell, 1995). Salience and importance of goals, which may be relevant for emotional well-being, can be seen by the order in which participants list their goals, information that is not obtained by checklist-type measures. Also, Lavallee and Campbell (1995) argue that asking participants to write their own goals allows for greater detail and specificity and for a better match between goals and life events experienced. This in turn helps researchers identify a possible mechanism through which certain events may impact emotional well-being.

Another advantage of using idiographic goals is that each individual describes his/her goals differently. Two people may have the same ultimate goal to do well in school, but they may describe that goal differently. For example, one person may describe a more abstract goal of doing well in classes, while the other person may describe a more concrete goal of getting all As. A list of goals does not provide the experimenter with a clear picture of whether individuals think in an abstract or concrete manner when it comes to their goals. It is possible that how people formulate and articulate their goals may be relevant to emotional well-being. For example, Emmons (1992) reported that college students and newlyweds with abstract goals reported more psychological distress. As such, assessing idiographic goals allows researchers to examine whether the way in which individuals list, describe, or organize their personal goals reveals important information about their cognitive representation of their goals. Furthermore, individual differences in characteristics of idiographic goals may moderate relationships between life events and mood or behavior. Due to these various reasons, obtaining idiographic goals may be the best way to examine how goal representations and organization can impact emotional well-being.

Goal Characteristics

Content categories. Goals are organized and described differently by individuals. For example, goals can be defined by their applicability to different life categories, such as

vocational/education, leisure, financial, health, emotional, spirituality, identity, and relationship goals (Nurmi et al., 2009). The connection between goals and emotional well-being can depend in part upon the personal importance of the life category to which the goal belongs. A study by Cantor, Norem, and Brower (1987) using honors college students found that achievement goals (e.g., performing well in school, creating future goals, and managing time) were appraised as more difficult, stressful, and requiring more effort than interpersonal goals (e.g., making friends, being independent, and establishing an identity). In the same study, interpersonal goals were judged to be more rewarding when accomplished than achievement goals. A study by Nurmi et al. (2009) on an undergraduate population found that goals focused on the family were rated to have high importance, suggesting that interpersonal goals are viewed as rewarding and meaningful. Cantor et al. (1991) stated that even though a group of people who live in a similar social situation share common goals, the importance they give to each of their goals differ. For example, undergraduates may all share similar academic and social goals, but some of the students may view social goals as more important than academic goals, therefore experiencing stronger emotions associated with those goals and related events.

      Goal diversity. The extent to which people have goals that are all under one life domain (e.g., work only), or in several diverse life categories (e.g., work, family, hobbies, etc.) may be an important factor influencing the relation between goal pursuit and emotional well-being. Is it better to have a diversity of highly valued personal goals that span different life categories, or is better to have personal goals that are concentrated in one life category? Few studies have looked explicitly at differentiation in personal goals, but self-complexity research, which looks at the extent to which the self is diverse versus unified, may be used to shape theories about goal diversity (Koch & Shepperd, 2004; Sheldon & Emmons, 1995).

One side of self-complexity research is based on the idea that people may have "too many eggs in one basket" if they are low on self-complexity (Linville, 1985), leading to difficulties coping with stress or failure. Several studies have found a positive relationship between self-complexity and coping with negative life events (Campbell, 1990; Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1985, 1987). More support for this idea comes from studies illustrating that those with high self-complexity experience less stress, illness, frustration, and lower risk for depression (Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000; Kalthoff & Neimeyer, 1993; Linville, 1987). An explanation for these findings is that high self-complexity creates a buffer against stress, negative feedback, and affective variability (Campbell, Chew, & Scratchley, 1991; Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1987), such that a negative experience in one life domain will not affect another life domain (Koch & Shepperd, 2004). It has also been demonstrated that people low in self-complexity experience higher emotional reactivity following self-relevant feedback (Linville, 1985; McConnell, Strain, Brown, & Rydell, 2009). However, this higher reactivity has both positive and negative consequences: positive feedback leads to higher positive affect and negative feedback leads to higher negative affect (Linville, 1985). McConnell et al. (2009) call this the "affective spillover" because feedback focused on one self-aspect represents a part of the overall self-concept due to low amount of self-complexity.

On the other hand, there is also evidence suggesting that there is a *negative* relationship between self-complexity and coping (Hershberger, 1990; Woolfolk, Novalany, Gary, Allen, & Polino, 1995; Woolfolk et al., 1999). Woodfolk et al. (1999) argued that there is actually a positive relationship between depression and self-complexity based on their findings. In this case, and other studies, the buffering effect of self-complexity was not corroborated (Kalthoff & Neimeyer, 1993; Morgan & Janoff-Bullman, 1994). Even though the "affective spillover" discussed by McConnell et al. (2009) demonstrates that low self complexity can be positive when

receiving positive feedback, it may be highly detrimental during negative times. One of the challenges with this literature, however, is that there is little agreement in ways of measuring self-complexity (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). Koch and Shepperd (2004) support this possibility by discussing various forms of measurements used. For example, some researchers such as Linville (1985) have used a card-sort task in which participants select and organize self-relevant traits. Others, like Morgan & Janoff-Bulman (1994) use an adjective checklist that distinguishes between negative and positive self-complexity. Negative self-complexity is operationalized as higher number of distinct negative self-aspects. Some researchers have argued that card-sort tasks lead to more positive self-complexity than negative (Conway & White-Dysart, 1999). In the end, possibly due to these differences in measuring self-complexity, the research on self-complexity is not clear as to which side is more beneficial (Koch & Shepperd, 2004).

Even though self-complexity research has some relevance for goal diversity research, being high on goal diversity is not the same as being high on self-complexity. It is thought that self-complexity tasks not only measure people's goals but also their plans to achieve these goals (Emmons, 1989). Only a handful of published reports have discussed the issue of goal diversity specifically, and to our knowledge there has been no systematic research on the relationship between goal diversity and emotional well-being. Sheldon and Emmons (1995) theorize that people with many goals in the same category are more likely to have positive emotional well-being. They report that this may be because when goals are related to each other, many of them can be attained with the same plan. This is more efficient than having separate plans for each goal. Also, when trying to come up with plans and solutions, it is easier to keep various goals in mind if they are similar to each other. If a person has goals in different life domains, he/she may make slower progress in accomplishing goals due to limited resources (Sheldon & Emmons,

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1995). Sheldon and Emmons (1995) supported this hypothesis by showing that people whose goals were highly differentiated rated progress and commitment to their goals as lower.

Another potential downside of goal diversity is the issue of goal conflict. Goal conflict occurs when the pursuit of one goal gets in the way of another goal due to limited resources (Riedger & Freund, 2004; Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2006). Therefore, having high goal diversity can lead to high goal conflict (Kelly et al. 2011). Some studies have shown that goal conflict can lead to psychological distress (Emmons 1986; Emmons & King, 1988; Palys & Little, 1983; Renner & Leibetseder, 2000; Riediger & Freund, 2004), but others have found no relationship (Kehr, 2003; Romero, Villar, Luego & Gomez-Fraguela, 2009; Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2006; Wallenius, 2000). Kelly et al. (2011) argue that possible interactions with other variables may account for the conflicting findings. In their study, goal conflict alone was not related to distress, but the interaction between goal conflict and goal ambivalence was. Those students with low levels of conflict and high levels of ambivalence reported higher depression symptoms. Ambivalence was defined by Kelly et al. (2011) as individuals pursuing a goal despite believing that they would be unhappy if they accomplished it. In conclusion, research in the areas of self-complexity, goal diversity, and goal conflict does not provide a clear answer to the question of whether goal diversity is beneficial or harmful to an individual – there is evidence to support both sides of the argument.

Abstract vs. concrete goals. Besides looking at how people organize their goals, research on how people frame their goals, whether in an abstract or concrete manner, may have important implications for emotional well-being. Researchers have suggested a hierarchy for categorizing goals. In this hierarchy, goals at the top are abstract and goals at the bottom are concrete (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Hadley & MacLeod, 2010). Hadley and MacLeod (2010) showed that goals could be reliably coded to show the distinction between abstract and concrete

goals. They theorized that abstract goals reflect the person's desired sense of self and desired outcome in life, whereas the concrete goals can be used to reach the important abstract goals. According to Rasmussen et al. (2006) and Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. (2003), because the goals at the top of the hierarchy reflect the desired sense of self, they are the most important to the person, although the accomplishment of lower goals is viewed as necessary to reach the abstract goals, and ultimately, happiness (Hadley & MacLeod, 2010). Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. (2003) further state that the closer the link between an abstract and concrete goal, the more important the concrete goal is to the individual.

Carver & Scheier (1990) discussed three different levels of goals within a hierarchical structure: system concepts, principles, and programs. System concepts are the highest and most abstract on the hierarchy, representing idealized images of the self; next are the principles, which are general behaviors that can lead to this image. Principles can be further broken down into daily concrete behaviors, called programs. An example of the system concept in the hierarchy is to become an Olympic runner, the principle is to become faster, and the program is to practice four hours a day.

The hierarchy leads to the idea that goals have equifinality; a higher abstract goal on the hierarchy can be reached through multiple ways (concrete subgoals). People use this hierarchy and different skills to attempt to match their current situation to their desired goals (Karoly, 1999). As mentioned previously, closing the gap between the current and the ideal self state has important implications for a person's emotional well-being. When a goal is extremely difficult to attain, the existence of many concrete goals may be useful. Even if people view a concrete goal as necessary to reaching a higher abstract goal, based on the concept of equifinality, they are able to formulate another concrete goal, or set of goals, that can lead them to the same abstract goal (Rasmussen et al., 2006; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Shulz, & Carver, 2003).

Some people may only focus on abstract goals, while others think more concretely. The types of goals people focus on can impact how they guide their behavior and their self-regulation. This difference between individuals can have an effect on personal emotional well-being. Emmons (1992) found that those people with abstract goals reported more psychological distress. He believes that progress towards abstract goals will be slower, since these goals do not consist of detailed plans, leading to lower emotional well-being. Also, it is more difficult to monitor the progress being made when goals are abstract. Unlike concrete goals, abstract goals have no objecting way of measuring progress. This lends to people having more subjective ways of measuring their progress and higher possibilities for biases and errors in their perception.

Life Events

People are more likely to report feeling lower life satisfaction if events in their life get in the way of attaining their personal goals (Nurmi et al., 2009). On the same note, if an important event occurs, people are more likely to react emotionally to events that are closely related to their important personal goals than to other events. An example of this is Emmons' (1991) finding that the mood of undergraduate students with achievement goals was affected by positive and negative achievement events but not interpersonal events, whereas people with relationship goals were affected by interpersonal events but not achievement events. Similarly, Lavallee and Campbell (1995) found that participants rated goal related negative events as more distressful, serious, and important compared to events that were not goal related. This led to higher negative affect during the time that the goal-related negative event occurred (Lavalle & Campbell, 1995). Interestingly, Cantor et al. (1991) found that people tend to view daily events through the "lens" of their important personal goals. For example, a person that views social goals as important would rate going to the library as a socially relevant event. On the other hand, a person who gives more importance to academic goals would not see attending the library as social, but

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academic. Understanding these different situations and interactions is important for adding to the knowledge of what factors influence people's reactions to life events and their emotional well-being (Lavalle & Campbell, 1995).

Since goal diversity may impact the way a person reacts to a negative life event, studying its moderating affect may be of interest. If goal diversity does indeed serve as a buffer when a negative life event occurs, it would be expected that a person with goals in many different categories would not be as negatively impacted when faced with a negative life event (Campbell et al. 1991; Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1987). On the other hand, having goals in different categories may not help. As Sheldon and Emmons (1995) mentioned, having goals in similar categories may be beneficial because a person can better keep track of their goals. In the face of an obstacle, it may be easier to come up with a new plan if the goals are similar to each other. Since prior research is not clear as to the relationship between goal diversity and emotional well-being, understanding the benefits of diversity in the face of an obstacle can add to the existing debate.

Goal Adjustment

When an impediment hinders the pursuit of a goal, people have to decide whether to keep trying or to find a new goal. Being optimistic, confident, and persistent when facing a barrier can prevent people from abandoning a goal that is within reach, and may also lead to positive affect and health. The current culture idealizes those who do not give up and keep trying, however, that is only a part of self-regulation. It can be just as important for people to abandon goals that are unattainable (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al., 2003). Disengaging from a goal keeps people from experiencing constant failure, helps to no longer view the goal as necessary for life satisfaction, and gives people the freedom to apply their limited resources to other goals (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller et al., 2003).

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Unfortunately, people are often biased in their judgments of goal attainment, and tend to ignore failures from the past and persist with impractical goals. Holding on to impossible goals increases negative affect, self-criticism, psychological and physiological distress, hopelessness, and depression (Lavallee & Campbell, 1995; Melges & Bowlby, 1969; Rasmussen et al., 2006; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller et al., 2003). In the case that people do choose to disengage from a goal, it is important that they not only halt effort towards the goal, but also to their commitment to the idea as well. If a person solely takes away the effort to pursue a goal but still views the goal as important it can lead to distress. When disengaging from a goal, replacing it with a more attainable goal is highly adaptive and it creates that feeling of still having a purpose while taking away the thoughts of failure. For those who view a concrete goal as necessary for the attainment of a higher abstract goal, finding another concrete goal that can lead them down the same path is useful (Rasmussen et al., 2006; Wrosch, Scheier, & Carver et al. 2003).

Summary and Study Hypotheses

In summary, goals are an important part of people's everyday lives. Individual differences in the cognitive representation of goals may play an important role in the relationship between goal pursuit and emotional well-being. There is a clear need to further understand how goal diversity can impact emotional well-being. Goal diversity can be especially important when people are faced with negative life events that create an obstacle to their goals. Negative life events that restrict goal progress can lead to negative affect, and the moderating effect of diversity could shed light onto why people emotionally react to similar events differently. In addition, the extent to which people think about their goals more abstractly versus concretely may also have an impact on emotional well-being. Those people who think in an abstract manner when it comes to their goals may underestimate their goal progress or struggle with creating plans to obtain the important goals.

The primary purpose of the proposed study was to examine the relationships among goal characteristics, life events, and emotional well-being. Specifically, we examined two different aspects of goal characteristics: abstraction and diversity. We also inspected longitudinal change and interactions of goals, life events, and emotional well-being from the beginning (Time 1) to the end (Time 2) of the academic year in a sample of college students. Personal goals were assessed at Time 1, and measures of emotional well-being were administered at Time 1 and Time 2. In past research, emotional well-being has been operationalized in many different ways. Some studies, for example, have created well-being scores using satisfaction with life scales, depression scales, and a positive and negative affect scales (Emmons, 1986; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). In this study, emotional well-being is defined primarily by current worry and depressive symptoms. Idiographic goals were used to ensure that the goals provided were those that are most important to the participant. The use of idiographic goals was thought to help capture the extent to which people, when allowed to describe their goals in their own way, think about their own goals in abstract vs. concrete terms.

Hypothesis 1: We investigated the relationship of emotional well-being, as measured by mood, worry, and depression questionnaires, with people who have more abstract versus concrete goals. It was hypothesized that people with a higher proportion of abstract goals would have a more difficult time effectively engaging in self-regulation (making plans to accomplish goals and evaluating progress) and would therefore report lower emotional well-being.

Hypothesis 2: It was hypothesized that there would be a relationship between diversity and emotional well-being. We examined the amount of diversity found in a person's goals, as evidenced by the different life categories into which their idiographic goals fall. Further, the effect of the interaction between goal diversity at Time 1 and a reported negative life event on emotional well-being at Time 2 was also studied. It was hypothesized that goal diversity would

moderate the effect of a negative life event on emotional well-being. Since there is not a clear basis for predicting the direction of this relationship and moderating effect based on the existing literature, these analyses are exploratory.

In addition, several hypotheses were added after the coding of the data that included the role of goal adjustment. It was expected that life categories would predict emotional well-being over and above goal disengagement and reengagement. Again, because the existing literature on goal diversity (and self-complexity) is mixed, the direction of the prediction was not specified. In addition, it was hypothesized that life categories and better goal adjustment would interact to predict a change in emotional well-being.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

The study used archival data from a study of perfectionism and goal adjustment. At Time 1 (beginning of fall semester), the study included 387 University of North Carolina at Greensboro undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses. There were 95 males and 276 females in the study all 18 years or older, with a mean age of 18.77 ($SD = 1.35$). The sample was 57.1% Caucasian, 29.5% African American, 6.2% Asian, 4.1% Latino, 0.3% Native American, and 0.3% Pacific Islander. Participants were volunteers who received partial course credit in return for their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Two weeks before the end of spring semester, participants from Time 1 were asked to complete an online follow-up questionnaire via email. Of the original 387 participants, 135 participants (21 males and 113 females) chose to participate at Time 2. Participants at time two were slightly older, but did not differ in measures of emotional well-being. These participants were provided with a link to the study and were given a small cash payment.

Measures and Procedure

Participants completed randomly-ordered, paper and pencil, questionnaires at Time 1 as part of mass testing sessions. The data from the following questionnaires were used for this study:

Personal Goals Inventory (PGI). The PGI was created for this study using Emmons' (1986) research on personal strivings. It consists of asking the participant to list their eight most important goals. The participants then have to answer questions about their goals using a likert-type rating scale. The questions include: "How difficult is it for you to succeed at this goal?" (1 = *extremely easy* to 5 =

extremely difficult); "How much progress have you made toward this goal?" (0 = *none, haven't even tried* to 5 = *I've already met this goal*); and *"How likely is it that you will be able to accomplish this goal in the future?"* (1 = *completely unlikely* to 7 = *certain*). Participants also rate feelings of emotion when they are making progress or failing at attaining the goal (on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*).

Profile of Mood States – Short Form. The POMS-SF (Shacham, 1983) is a self-report measure of psychological distress. It measures fatigue-inertia, vigor-activity, tension-anxiety, depression-dejection, anger-hostility, and confusion-bewilderment. It contains 37 items that are rated a 5-point likert-type scale (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*) that respond to the question "how have you been feeling during the past week including today." This measure has good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α = .76 to .95; Curran, Andrkowski, & Studts, 1995). For this study, Cronbach's α was .89.

The Penn State Worry Questionnaire. The PSWQ (Meyer, Miller, Metzger & Borkovec, 1990) is a self-report measure of the trait of worry. It contains 16 questions (e.g., "my worries overwhelm me," or "I have been a worrier all my life") rated from 1 (*not at all typical of me*) to 5 (*very typical of me*). This measure has good test-retest reliability and high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .86 to .91; Meyer, Miller, Metzger & Borkovec, 1990). For this study, internal reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .76).

Beck Depression Inventory-II. The BDI-II (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) is a self-report measure of the severity of depressive symptoms (during the past 2 weeks). The questionnaire includes 21 items are rated on a 4-point scale (0 to 3). Psychometric properties of this scale have been found to be excellent in clinical and undergraduate samples (Dozois, Covin, Hilsenroth, & Segal, 2004; Dozois, Dobson, & Ahnberg, 1998). Cronbach's α was .88 for this study. This measure was also completed at Time 2.

Goal Adjustment Scale (GAS). The GAS (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003) consists of 10 items, 4 items measuring goal disengagement (GAS-D) and 6 items measuring goal reengagement (GAS-R). Items are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *almost never true* and 5 = *almost always true*). Some items are reverse scored. Good internal consistency of the GAS-D (Cronbach's α = .84) and GAS-R (Cronbach's α = .86) have been reported (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003).

Time 2

At Time 2, participants were asked to complete follow-up measures during a three-week period. Participants who had not yet completed the survey received reminder emails regularly. The follow-up data that will be used for this study include the following:

Life events. Participants were asked to describe (in three sentences or less) the most difficult two-week period they experienced since Time 1.

Patient Health Questionnaire – Depression Scale (PHQ-9). This is a self-report measure used to identify depression. For this study, instructions were changed so that participants reported about the worst two week period since Time 1 (in the above Life Events item). Items on the scale correspond to current diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder. It is used both as a continuous measure (0 - 27) and with cutpoints to determine severity. It has been shown to have good internal reliability (α = .86 to .92), high sensitivity and specificity, and good correspondence with interviewer ratings (r = .83) (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001; Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 1999). In this study, Cronbach's α = .89.

Beck Depression Inventory-II. The BDI-II was also completed at Time 2 (see description above).

Coding

Goals were coded by undergraduate research assistants using the systems described below. After first being trained in the use of the coding system, undergraduate assistants then

practiced coding a set of example goals in order to ensure an understanding of the coding system. Once the coding guidelines were clear and coders felt comfortable, they began coding the study goals. An additional meeting was required during coding to retrain and clarify the guidelines for abstract/concrete coding. Goals were coded by two separate raters (Rater 1 and Rater 2) to assess for interrater agreement. However, Rater 2 did not complete the final 108 participants. The coding for this last group was completed by the expert coder (AH, Rater 3).

Abstract vs. concrete. Using the hierarchy theory of goal categorization, goals were coded to determine their level of abstraction. A scale similar to that developed by Vincent, Boddana, and MacLeod (2004) was used to score goals on a 0-3 scale. Goals scored as 0-1 were categorized as abstract, and goals coded 2-3 were categorized as concrete. However, the coding guidelines were developed specifically for this study. More detail about the coding system and guidelines can be found in Appendix A.

Goal diversity. Goals were also grouped into categories depending on their content. The categories were: emotional, identity, career/occupational, education, financial/monetary, leisure, health, romantic relationships, friendships, family. Each goal was categorized by its main idea and could only be placed into one of the 10 categories. Diversity is defined as the number of different categories reflected by the 8 identified goals and could therefore range from 1 to 8.

Categorization of life events. Life events provided at Time 2 were grouped using the same category coding used for goal diversity. However, each life event could fall in more than one life category.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Reliability of Coding

  Goal diversity. Analyses were first conducted to determine the reliability between the two undergraduate coders. For goal diversity, a variable was created for each coder that represented the total number of categories each participant reported in their goals (1-8, with larger numbers indicating greater diversity). The reliability between rater one and two for total number of categories per participant was good ($\alpha = .82$). After interrater agreement was calculated, an expert coder (AH) recoded the goals in which disagreements were found (19% of goals).

  Abstract versus concrete. An abstract total variable was also created for both raters; this variable was the number of abstract goals each participant held (0-8), with lower numbers indicating a proportionally lower number of abstract goals. Reliability of this coding was problematic. Overall, Cronbach's alpha was poor, .54, for rater one and two. Examining the reliability separately for the two pairs of raters revealed substantial differences. Cronbach's alpha between Rater 1 and 2 was quite poor at .38, and reliability between Raters 1 and 3 was acceptable at .70. Based on this information, the expert coder (AH) recoded a random sampling of 224 goals. Unfortunately, cronbach's alpha between Rater 1 and AH was found to be unusually low at .026, and between Rater 2 and AH was .613.

  Besides the problematic coding and low reliability, further examination of the data revealed an additional problem. Most participants reported goals that were coded as either 1 (slightly abstract) or 2 (slightly concrete), very few participants were in the extremes (0 or 3)

suggesting limited variability in the data.   Based on these concerns, the decision was made to exclude the abstract/concrete variable from further analyses.

Descriptives

In terms of life categories, most goals reported by participants fell in the educational (22.1%) and career/financial (N = 593, 19.2%) categories (Figure 1). Most participants fell in the middle range of goal diversity; over 50% indicated 5 or 6 life categories (Figure 2). Finally, life events were mostly categorized in emotional (N = 59, 22.1), educational (N = 51, 19.1%), and romantic relationship (N = 43, 16.1%; Figure 3).

Hypothesis 2

To examine if there was a relationship between goal diversity and current emotional well-being, bivariate correlations between the total life categories and the T1BDI-II, PSWQ, POMS Depression, POMS Tired, and POMS energy were calculated. The correlations between life categories and emotional well-being measures were not significant (Table 1). Overall, findings demonstrate that, contrary to expectations, the number of life categories was not found to have a direct linear relationship to measures of emotional well-being. Since most participants were in the middle range of goal diversity (as described above), one possibility is that differences between the "extreme" groups may be masked by the full sample. Therefore, differences between the high (7-8 categories) and low (1-4 categories) groups were further explored. T-test analyses revealed a significant mean difference between the high and low groups on the POMS Depression score $t(150) = -2.14$, $p = .034$. The low diversity group reported a significantly lower mean score ($M = 10.57$ $SD = 4.16$) than the high diversity group ($M = 12.36$, $SD = 6.10$). However, t-tests analyses did not reveal significant mean differences between the high and low groups on the T1BDI-II score $t(149) = -1.50$, $p = .137$ or the PSWQ $t(149) = -1.42$, $p = .157$. These indicate

that those in the higher extreme of diversity demonstrate more negative mood symptoms but not higher depression or worry symptoms.

To test the possible moderation effect of goal diversity on the impact of negative life events and emotional well-being at Time 2, a simple linear regression was conducted. Participants were divided into two groups: those with a life event at Time 2 in the same category as a goal at Time 1 ($n = 109$; 80.7%) and those that did not have a matching event ($n = 26$; 19.3%). A variable was created to represent these groups. First a regression was conducted with the T2BDI-II as the dependent variable. In the first step, the variables for group (matching life event or no matching event) and number of categories were entered into the model, and in the next step the interaction between matching groups and number of categories was entered. There were no significant main effects for matching life events ($\beta = .06$, $p = .515$), number of categories ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .566$), or the interaction ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .595$) on T2BDI scores. The full model resulted in a non significant *adj R* $^2 = -.02$, $F(1,131) = .28$, $p = .595$. A regression was also conducted with PHQ, which assessed depressive symptoms during the most stressful period, as the dependent variable. There were no significant main effects for matching life events ($\beta = .09$, $p = .299$), number of categories ($\beta = .01$, $p = .905$), or the interaction ($\beta = .23$, $p = .601$) on PHQ scores. The full model resulted in an *adj R*$^2 = .00$, $F(1,131) = .27$, $p = .601$. These results can be found in Table 3. In summary, matching negative life events with goals at Time 1 and the interaction with the number of life categories does not significantly explain change in emotional well-being.

Additional hypotheses. To test for the possible effects that goal diversity, goal adjustment reengagement and disengagement, and their interaction could have on emotional well-being, a simple linear regression was carried out. Since the T1BDI-II and the POMS Depression were so highly correlated, $r = .70$, $p < .001$, a composite variable was created by standardizing

and summing the two variables. In addition, all predictor variables were centered. The composite BDI/POMS variable had a very slight correlation with the number of categories, $r = .09$, $p = .070$, a modest significant correlation with GAS reengagement, $r = -.14$, $p = .006$, and no significant correlation with GAS disengagement, $r = -..06$, $p = .287$.

First the variable for GAS reengagement and the number of categories were entered into the model with the BDI/POMS as the dependent variable. In the second step the interaction between GAS reengagement and number of categories was added. As expected, there were significant main effects for GAS reengagement ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .003$) and number of categories ($\beta = .12$, $p = .024$) on the BDI/POMS composite score. No interaction effect was found ($\beta = .04$, $p = .490$). The full model resulted in a nonsignificant $adj\ R^2 = .03$, $F(1,376) = .48$, $p = .490$ with a Cohen's $f^2 = 0.00$. A regression was also conducted with GAS disengagement and the number of categories in the first step, and the interaction between GAS disengagement and number of categories in the second step. Again, the number of life categories had a significant main effect on the BDI/POMS composite variable ($\beta = .10$, $p = .045$), but neither GAS disengagement ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .081$), nor the interaction ($\beta = -.042$, $p = .421$), demonstrated significant effects. The full model resulted in an $adj\ R^2 = .01$, $F(1,376) = .65$, $p = .421$ with a Cohen's $f^2 = 0.00$. These results can be found in Table 4. In summary, when controlling for the GAS variables, a higher number of life categories slightly predict negative emotional well-being.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The current study explored the connection between individual differences in the cognitive representation of goals and emotional well-being. Specifically, two important goal characteristics were studied: diversity and abstraction. The use of an idiographic goal assessment method allowed for greater detail, assessment of the participant's most salient goals, and a potential for better match between goals and negative life events (Lavallee and Campbell, 1995). The study attempted to add to the current debate in the literature of goal diversity and its connection to emotional well-being. In addition, since negative life events can restrict goal progress and lead to negative affect, the moderating effect of diversity was studied in order to answer the question of why people emotionally react to similar events differently.

Summary of Findings

Using participants' eight most important idiographically-generated personal goals, we were able to reliably code the diversity of life categories reflected in these goals. Most participants fell in the middle range of goal diversity and had goals that focused on education and career/financial areas of life. The number of life categories participants held was not significantly correlated with the measures of emotional well-being (depressive symptoms, worry) at Time 1. However, when a composite variable was created with the BDI and POMS depression measures, there was a very slight correlation between emotional well-being and number of categories that approached significance. When the number of life categories was entered into a regression analyses with the goal adjustment scales it emerged as a significant predictor of emotional well-being. Likewise, the goal adjustment reengagement measure was only modestly correlated with

the composite emotional well-being variable but was highly significant in the regression. Past studies indicate that high goal differentiation is positive (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995), while others demonstrate that goal differentiation leads to goal conflict and psychological distress (Emmons 1986; Emmons & King, 1988; Palys & Little, 1983; Renner & Leibetseder, 2000; Riediger & Freund, 2004). The results from the current study are consistent with the idea that a high number life categories can lead to high negative emotion when other variables are accounted for, although the magnitude of the effect is extremely small.

In addition, negative life events that occurred in the same domain as these important personal goals did not seem to impact emotional well-being. These negative life events tended to focus on emotional, educational, and romantic areas of life. Finally, the number of life categories did not seem to moderate the impact on emotional well-being of a negative life event.

Regarding the abstract versus concrete results, it was not possible to truly test the potential for a negative impact on emotional well-being when people think about their goals abstractly instead of concretely due to low reliability in coding. Despite the use of a reliable scale for abstract versus concrete coding (Vincent, Boddana, & MacLeod, 2004), reliability between the two trained raters in the current study was quite low, suggesting that the construct was not adequately captured in the coding system. Emmons (1992) used a similar scale but categorized the person, not the goals. Participants in his study provided 15 goals that could be high-level goals (abstract) or low-level goals (concrete). Each participant was then categorized using a 5 point scale (1 = *more low than high-level goals* to 5 = *almost all high-level)*. This method could have possibly increased rater agreement while still measuring the individual differences between abstract versus concrete thinking.

Study Limitations

Despite the many benefits discussed of using idiographic goals, the cognitive organization and structure of people's goals and effects on the retrieval process are not well understood. When asked to list their goals, participants may have thought of their most important goal and then continued to list only the goals related to the first goal written. In other words, participants may have remained in only one area of life when retrieving a list of their goals. Due to this possible cognitive process, participants that hold goals in various areas of life may not have reported those goals and could have been coded as low in diversity. Although in this sample, most participants had goals in five to six categories, indicating that diversity was captured. Additionally, when attempting to capture the level of individual abstraction, some information may have been missed due to the reporting process. It is possible that individuals may think of their goals in a concrete manner but when reporting they change their style. In other words, a participant may have written their goal in an abstract manner to save time even though they may cognitively hold the goal concretely.

Another limitation is the nature of the Time 2 data. Participants provided a description of the most stressful two week period in the past year, however, they were not provided with a list of the goals they reported at Time 1. It is possible that participants were reporting the most recent, rather than the most stressful, life event but not one related to their goals or an event that was highly important. In future studies it would be important to specifically assess events related to identified goals to ascertain their impact on emotional well-being.

Finally, the sample in this study may present a limitation. Both abstract/concrete and life categories/diversity may look different in a sample with people who are depressed. In this rather healthy college sample, very few people held completely abstract or completely concrete goals. It is possible that people struggling with depression may fall more on the abstract end. In terms of

goal diversity, most of the goals fell in the education and career category which is to be expected from a college student sample. Obtaining goals from a depressed population may look different, maybe showing a higher focus on emotional goals that have been blocked by the depressive symptoms.

Implications and Future Directions

Research has demonstrated that the connection between goals and emotional well-being can depend on the importance of the goal or life category the goal belongs to (Cantor, Norem, & Brower, 1987; Nurmi et al. 2009). In future studies, it would be of use to not only identify how people categorize and cognitively structure their goals, but also how important each goal is to them. It is possible that the more important a goal is to a person, the more impact a negative life event will have on emotional well-being. Attending to the importance of goals while using the idiographic method may also aid in understanding if the most important goals are those written first, and how the abstraction and categorization of these goals impact emotional well-being. In addition, the type of life category may be of importance to future goal research. As Cantor, Norem, & Brower, (1987) find, achievement goals were seen as more difficult than interpersonal goals, and interpersonal goals were rated as more rewarding to accomplish.   It is possible then that too many achievement goals could be problematic, while many interpersonal goals would not. This could lead to cases in which goal diversity would seem positive, while in others it would seem negative.

Obtaining idiographic goals from college students is an important contribution of the current study. It allows insight into how college students structure their goals and the areas they focus their time and effort into. Understanding what matters to students and how they think can provide a first step into further research of goals and emotional well-being. This study also provides the initial attempts at coding abstract versus concrete ideographic goals instead of those

provided in a list to participants. Looking ahead, this study opens the door to the research of

which goals are important, the interaction between abstract goals and life categories, moderating

factors in goal diversity such as personality variables and social support found by McConnell et

al. (2009), the reason for a connection between abstract goals and negative emotional well-being,

and the cognitive explanation behind how people chose to report their goals.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Time 1 Data

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Life Categories	5.26 (1.18)							
2. PSWQ	3.20 (0.91)	.05						
3. T1BDI-II	8.92 (7.73)	.08	.44**					
4. POMS Depression	10.80 (4.55)	.09	.34**	.70**				
5. POMS Tired	10.87 (4.45)	.02	.26**	.51**	.52**			
6. POMS Energy	13.50 (4.75)	-.04	-.22**	-.28**	-.23**	-.28**		
7. GAS Reengagement	21.69 (3.73)	.11*	-.11*	-.16**	-.09	-.06	.07	
8. GAS Disengagement	9.74 (3.05)	.04	-.11*	-.08	-.08	-.10	-.02	.24**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Time 2 Data

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Life Categories	5.22 (1.88)				
2. Event		.25**			
3. POMS Depression	12.70 (6.31)	-.08	.08		
4. PHQ2	10.66 (6.57)	.03	.09	.43**	
5. T2BDI-II	10.75 (9.16)	-.03	.06	.71**	.56**

* p < .05. ** p < .01.

Table 3

Regression Predicting Time 2 Well-being from Negative Life Event and Goal Diversity

Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	β	*adj R²*	*p*
Time 2 BDI-II					
Step 1					
Event Present	1.31	2.00	.06	-.00	.515
Step 2					
Categories	-0.40	0.70	-.05	-.01	.566
Step 3					
Event X Categories	-0.92	1.72	-.24	-.02	.595
Time 2 PHQ					
Step 1					
Event Present	1.49	1.43	.09	.00	.299
Step 2					
Categories	0.06	0.50	.01	-.01	.905
Step 3					
Event X Categories	0.65	1.23	.23	-.01	.601

Table 4

Regression Predicting Emotional Well-being from Goal Adjustment and Goal Diversity

| Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	β	*adj R²*	*p*
Time 1 BDI/POMS					
Step 1				.03	.002
GAS Reengagement	-.07	.02	-.15		.003
Number of Life Categories	.17	0.08	.12		.024
Step 2				.03	.490
GAS Reengagement	-.07	.02	-.15		.003
Number of Life Categories	.17	.08	.12		.024
GAS Re X Categories	.01	.02	.04		.490
Time 1 BDI/POMS					
Step 1				.01	.034
GAS Disengagement	-.05	.03	-.09		.081
Number of Life Categories	.15	.08	.10		.045
Step 2				.02	.421
GAS Disengagement	-.05	.03	-.09		.073
Number of Life Categories	.14	.08	.10		.065
GAS Dis X Categories	-.02	.03	-.04		.421
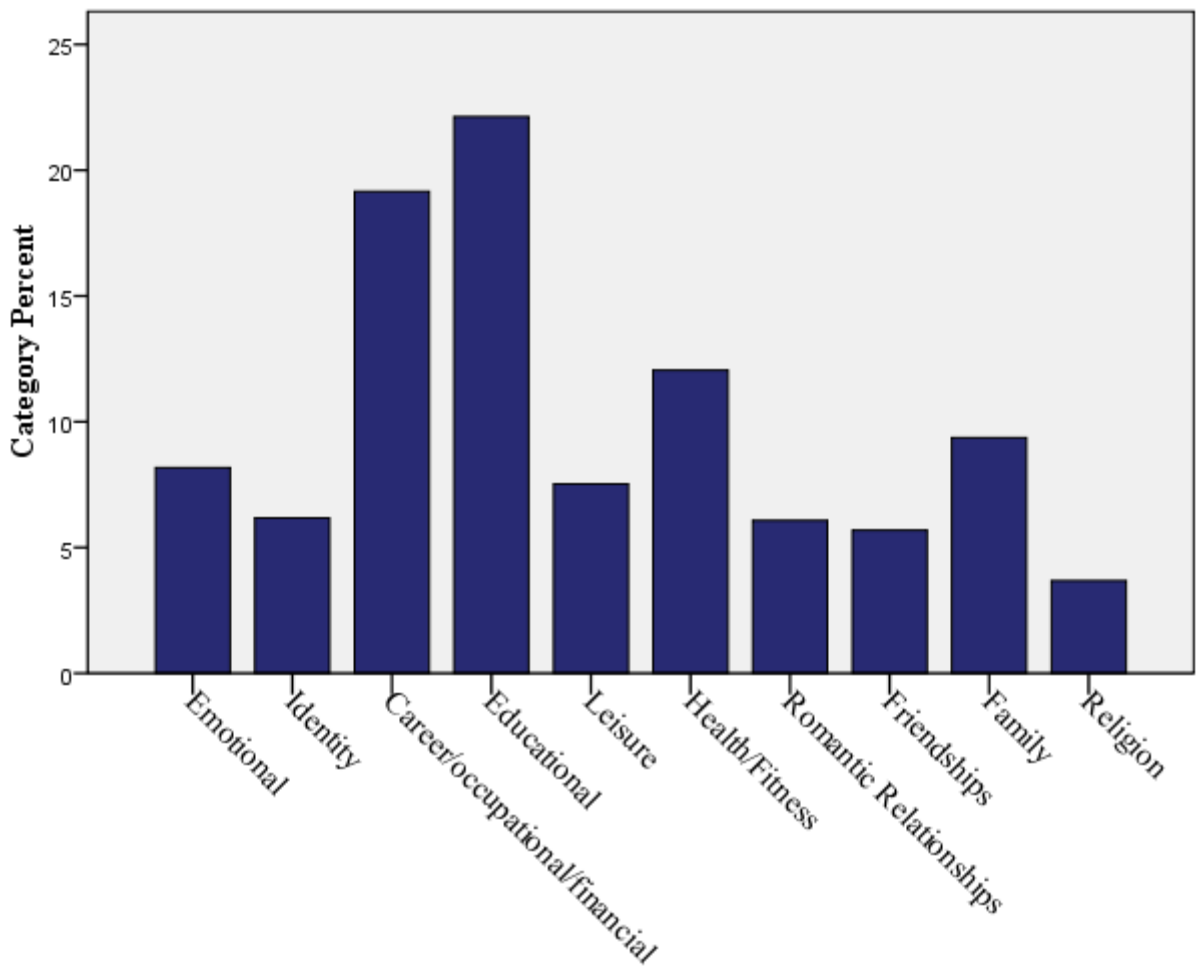
Figure 1. Frequency of Goal Categories coded
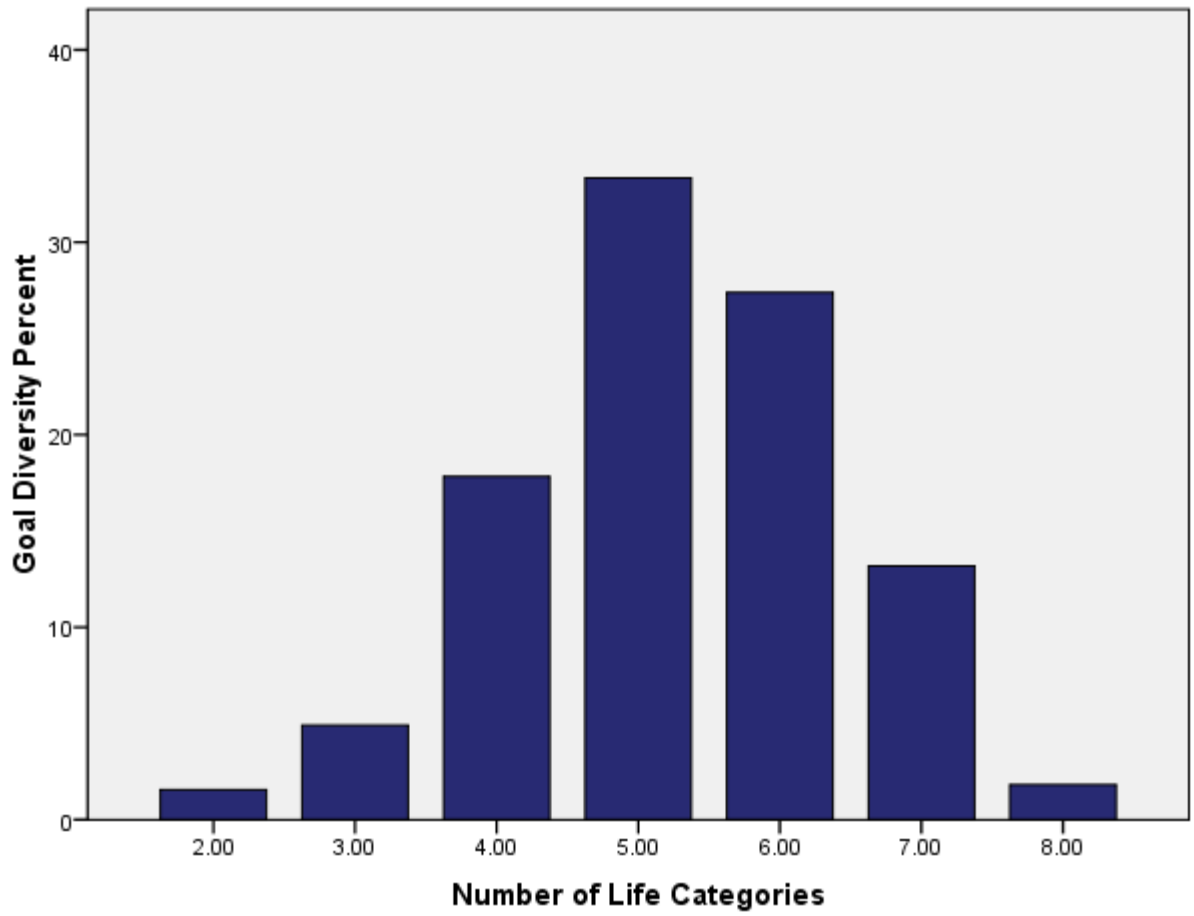
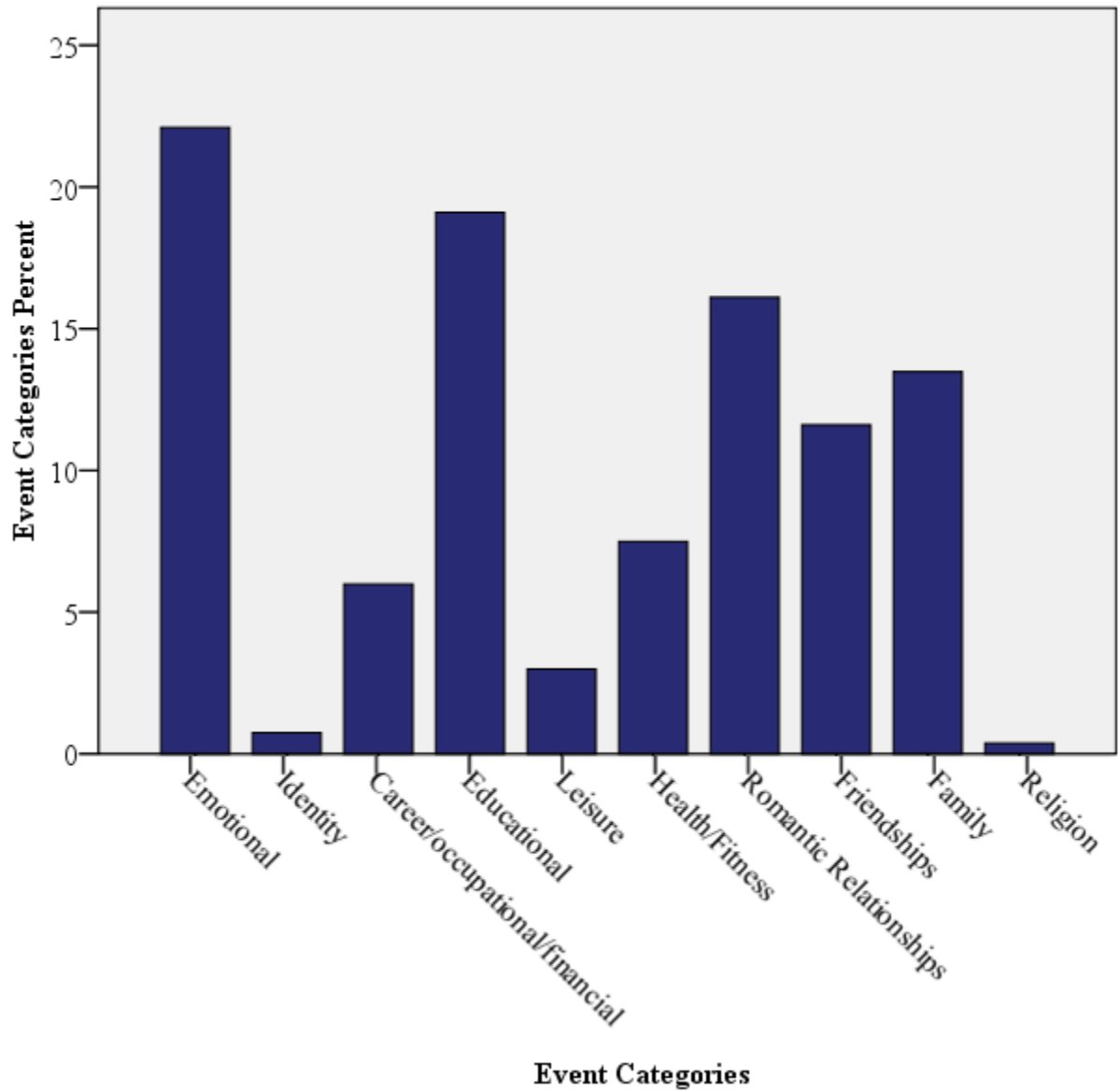*Figure 2. Frequency of Goal Diversity*

Figure 3. Frequency of Life Event Categories coded

APPENDIX B

GOAL CODING

The following guidelines will be used in order to code goals as abstract or concrete:

1) If a goal is about trying to become a certain type of person or an image of the self, it
   should be coded as 0.

2) Goals that are about <u>specific everyday behaviors</u> that can be viewed as a way of
   obtaining a larger self-concept will be coded as 3.

   a. Repetitive action

   b. High amount of detail

   c. Goals *may* include an ending point.

3) For goals falling in between (scores 1 and 2):

   a. Is it a behavior that helps achieve a greater sense of self (personality
      descriptor)?

      i. Think about what type of person that would help them be. (Ex.
         Altruistic)

      ii. If yes, code 2

   b. Figure out if it can be broken down - Ask the question "how?"

      i. Are there specific behaviors that can be used to accomplish this
         goal?

      ii. Example: If a person has the goal to be healthy, it is obvious it can
          be further broken down by asking how? Subgoals of "to be healthy"
          could be to eat more vegetables or to exercise daily.

      iii. If it can, code as 1

      iv. If it can't, code as 2

c. Can you measure goal progression?

    i. If no, code as 1

d. Notice if the code includes feelings and emotions

    i. If yes, code as 1