

Beyond the asymmetries between pleasure and pain. An exploratory study of the links between regulatory focus, trait affectivity and motivational persistence

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Abstract: Motivational persistence (MP) is a recently introduced concept that describes individuals' goal striving endeavors in a trait based paradigm. The present paper, representing one of several steps in testing and understanding motivational persistence, has explored the relation between MP and a goal orientation model, general affectivity and affect-related personality dimensions. A total sample of 123 participants completed the measures for chronic regulatory focus, positive and negative affects, extraversion and emotional stability and motivational persistence. Canonical correlations revealed a positive linear relation between Current Purposes Pursuing (CPP) and Long-term Purposes Pursuing (LTPP) subscales of MP and promotion focus and positive affect. The negative affect was negatively linked with CPP and LTPP, and the relation with extraversion and emotional stability was weak. The implications for understanding the motivational persistence model were discussed.

Keywords: motivational persistence, regulatory focus, affectivity, extraversion, emotional stability

I. Introduction

The efforts to integrate the research on emotion and motivation in the perspective of goal-directed behavior, through the investigation of the relationships between traits, success and failure-related affects and their non-emotional motivational correlates can be a promising research avenue. At least from an individual-differences perspective, the interest in uncovering the relations between these aspects is univocal, at least regarding the applications for the organizational and educational contexts. Concepts like dispositional goal orientations (Dweck, 1986; VandeWalle, 1997), motivational systems (Carver & White, 1994) or strategic chronic tendencies (Higgins, 1998) are designed in an attempt to fill this gap. However, given the complex interdependencies, a parsimonious model is difficult to build

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and test (Sheldon, 2004; Zweig & Webster, 2004). Similar to traits, these personal proclivities are chronic, relatively stable and have biological correlates, but seem to be more sensitive to, and thus defined in terms of adjustment to situational constraints. Analyzed through a trait perspective, these elements show various relations with a basic personality dimension; however, at a closer investigation of the literature, we have not identified any attempts to analyze them in relation to the self-evaluated strength of goal pursuit.

In previous studies, we introduced the concept of motivational persistence, defined as a relatively stable characteristic of the conative system that reflects the capacity to withstand both short-term and more long-term endeavors (Constantin, 2008, 2009; Constantin, Holman, & Hojbotă, 2012; Hojbotă & Constantin, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Matran & Constantin, 2009). In line with Scholer and Higgins (2010), we believe “understanding how people self-regulate is essential to understanding personality itself” (p. 291), especially when it comes to explaining the mechanism associated with persistence. Although the purpose of our study is mainly exploratory, in the following section we seek to hypothesize the possible relations between the analyzed concepts.

The conceptualization of motivational persistence

Motivational persistence was first conceptualized as a characteristic reflecting self-regulatory, instrumental traits that represents the central aspect of the strength of goal striving (Constantin, 2008) that can be trained as a skill and solidified through practice. Persistence concerns both the availability (motivational strength) as well as the effective dosage of resources to support the decision to continue to exert effort over prolonged periods of time, despite repeated obstacles, fatigue, frustration or lack of any rewards. Put differently, since defined by its authors as a trait-like feature, a trans-situational quality, persistence is not considered in a domain-specific frame but rather is reflected in the success with which personal goals are followed, irrespective of the time frame of the respective goals (Hojbotă & Constantin, 2009a).

This proposed concept has attached a tripartite structure, each component relying on related but different self-regulatory aspects: long term purposes pursuing (LTPP), current purposes pursuing (CPP), and recurrence of unattained pursuits (RUP) (Constantin, Holman, & Hojbotă, 2012). LTPP is a feature of the trait that supports the stability or endurance of the pursuits of long-term endeavors. CPP is the aspect that depicts more situational responses to challenging tasks, referring to the here and now. Since they rely on a common energy supply (Gailliot & Baumesiter, 2007), goals may inhibit each other and compete for personal resources, and this may

inevitably lead to the abandonment or cessation of some of them. While the first two mentioned scales reflect a present and future perspective, the RUP items are more concerned with the tendency of the individual goal system to signal the currently unattained but personally meaningful goals and prevent premature disengagement. These recurrent mental events may indicate that the goal is still pursued consciously or unconsciously and that it is strongly internalized or valued.

Motivational persistence and trait positive and negative affectivity

Endurance in pursuing both short-term and long-term goals is expected to be closely related to extraversion and specifically, the positive affectivity facet, since they all derive from the same resourcefulness that serves overcoming external and self-generated, subjective obstacles (Costello & Eysenck, 1961).

In light of previous results, indicating the tendency to think about and resume important past projects to be characteristic of more state-oriented individuals (Constantin et al., 2012), we expect RUP to relate to both negative and positive affectivity. Intrusive thoughts about past goals presumably indicate a lack of progress towards a goal or an amputated endeavor (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999; for a recent conceptualization on the motivational consequences of constructive and unconstructive ruminative phenomena, see Kirkegaard, Thomsen, Tønnesvang, Schnieber, Olesen, 2011). As these and other studies suggest, repetitive cognitive phenomena focusing on past important but unattained goals can “cut both ways”: while they seem to be associated with the strength of current and long-term purposes pursuing, they can also affect well-being and ultimately impede goal pursuit by intrusively hijacking available resources.

Possible links between regulatory focus and persistence

Previous studies linking regulatory focus to trait models have shown that promotion orientation correlates with behavioral activation and extraversion, while prevention seems to be positively related to neuroticism and negatively to impulsivity (Grant & Higgins, 2003). In a more recent article, Scholer and Higgins (2012) argued that both prevention and promotion orientations have advantages and disadvantages for various domains, including self-control and self-regulation. Failing to attain progress towards one's aspirations or promotion-framed goals may lead to depression (Straumann et al., 2006). On the other hand, a prevention focus could also present advantages for continuance of goal pursuits over the alternative focus.

Regarding the expected relations between motivational persistence and regulatory foci, we expect more nuanced patterns of results. Promotion individuals are more likely to give in to temptations or distractions (Förster, Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000). This is in contrast to prevention-focused persons who prefer maintenance of the status quo; they are less likely to “keep the eyes on the prize” in favor of new, currently more attractive ones (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). Prevention could work through a shielding effect, getting individuals to ignore alternative paths of action (Molden & Higgins, 2004), prefer safe or low-risk alternatives (Zhang & Mittal, 2007), being less open to change (Higgins, 2008), thus enabling the capacity of maintaining engagement. These features of prevention-focused individuals may give them the circumspection people need for protecting long-term commitments. Despite these results, some data advocate the advantage of promotion focused individuals in facing certain types of temptations. For instance, Dholakia, Gopinath, Bagozzi, and Natarajan (2006) argue that approaching or focusing on the long-term goal, although simultaneously reporting a heightened desire toward the alternative goal or tempting object, promotion-focused individuals showed more self-control than their prevention-focused counterparts.

Considering the subscales, we expect LTPP items to be closer to the preference of defining goals in terms of promotion since they reflect the capacity to reinvest resources in terms of energy, time, attention, claiming a framing of goals in terms of wanted states or aspirations or in other words, positive, clear end-state images. On the other hand, we believe promotion and prevention foci to be similarly associated to current purposes pursuing since daily tasks are marked by challenges and difficulties that could be regulated by focusing on either good outcomes or avoiding negative ones, such as failing to complete duties or obligations. Thirdly, we expect the RUP to be more related to the security aspect of goal pursuit, namely prevention, since this motivational persistence subscale relates to failed accomplishment or suspended endeavors that habitually take over cognitive and emotional resources. Kierkegaard et al. (2011) implied that while reflection is associated with more internalized endeavors, having goals with avoidance contents induces rumination.

We previously tested the relationship between motivational persistence and other traits, such as grit, action-control and persistence measured with the TCI scale (Constantin et al., 2012). In this present study we aim to identify the relations with affectivity, measured in two different ways, as positive and negative trait affect (Watson et al., 1988) and as extraversion and emotional stability (Goldberg et al., 2006) and chronic promotion and prevention orientation (Higgins et al., 2001).

The present research

In this present work, our goal was to extend the analysis of the nomological network of the proposed construct, by analyzing the direction and magnitude of association with trait positive and negative affectivity and regulatory foci.

Several models, like cybernetic-inspired theories, such as the control process model (Carver & Scheier, 1990), mood as input hypothesis (Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 1988) and clinical accounts, such as self-regulation theory of depression (Strauman, 2002), postulate the central role of the quality or effectiveness of self-regulatory attempts, including success and failure in goals' pursuits. In light of these accounts, we believe the self-reported quality of goal pursuit, especially for long-term endeavors, to be positively associated with a positive affect and inversely with negative emotionality and neuroticism.

Regarding the nature of the relationship between the tenacious goal pursuit and the type of goal representations, in terms of promotion and prevention, our directional predictions are limited since both orientations essentially represent different strategies of approaching the same goals, which come with specific benefits and costs in terms of self-regulation (Scholer & Higgins, 2008). For instance, a chronic tendency to choose promotion goals could enable and sustain prolonged efforts since setting motivating, inspiring goals are suspected to draw personal resources to a greater extent than prevention-framed objectives; on the other hand, promotion oriented individuals are suspected to be more volatile in their choices.

II. Method

Participants

Senior undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences participated in this research, in exchange for course credits. The final sample consisted of 123 participants ($M_{age} = 21.8$ years, $SD_{age} = 1.25$) of whom 120 were females (90.9%).

Measures and Procedure

All enrolled participants received on their personal email addresses an electronic questionnaire that comprised a larger set of measures among which were included the four instruments dedicated to this particular study.

The Motivational Persistence scale (MP) is an 18 item instrument developed by Constantin et al. (2012) in order to measure three dimensions of persistence: Current Purposes Pursuing (CPP), Long-term Purposes Pursuing (LTPP) and Recurrence of Unattained Pursuits (RUP). CPP reflects

the focus on actual tasks and the capacity to exceed perceived obstacles in order to achieve them effectively. LTPP measures the commitment when it comes to pursuing the accomplishment of long-term objectives, and RUP captures the recurrent tendency to reflect on past unfulfilled goals. Each factor is operationalized through 6 items based on 5-point response scales (1 = in a very low degree to 5 = in a very high degree).

The Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001; Romanian version by Rusu et al., 2012) is a 9-item, two-factor self-report measure of chronic regulatory focus. The Promotion and Prevention subscales are based on 5 and respectively 4 items on a 5-point scale. Promotion pride reflects individuals' orientation to future goals based on their history of promotion success while prevention pride is conditioned by prevention success.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) consists of a 10-item scale for the measurement of positive affect (PA) and another 10 item scale for negative affect (NA). Participants had to rate all 20 emotions on a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all and 5 = very much) with the 'in general' time-frame instruction.

Extraversion and Emotional Stability (Neuroticism) were measured with the IPIP-50 (Goldberg et al., 2006; Romanian version by Rusu et al., 2012). Even though the entire IPIP questionnaire was used, only these two specific factors concerned the study's goal. Each of the two factors (E and ES) was operationalized through 10 items on a 5-point scale.

III. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics among zero-order correlations and reliability estimates for all the psychological constructs included in the study. In order to explore the pattern of relationships between the three motivational persistence subscales (CPP, LTPP, RUP) and (1) chronic regulatory focus subscales (Promotion and Prevention), (2) positive and negative affect (PA, NA), and (3) extraversion and emotional stability, we computed canonical correlations. This is accepted as the most appropriate multivariate statistical technique in situations where the researcher aims at determining the nature of relationships between a pair of multiple independent variables (predictors) and multiple dependent variables (criteria) (Weiss, 1972). In this present case, it was not appropriate to label either of the variables as independent/predictors or dependent/criteria, and we applied the general umbrella-term of 'variable set'. In all three situations, the MP subscales were treated as the first set of variables and the RF scales, PANAS scales, and the two selected Big Five personality factors (Extraversion and Emotional Stability), were used consecutively as the second variable set. The variables from each set are aggregated into linear composites referred to as

canonical variates; a pair of variates forms a canonical function. Besides the canonical correlation (the strength of the relationship between a function's variates) the other important indexes, standing for an accurate interpretation, are the redundancy index (reflecting the amount of variance in each variable of a set explained by the other set's variate), and the canonical cross-loadings (the correlation of each variable with the opposite variate) (Hair et al., 1998).

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. CPP	.68								
2.LTPP	.62**	.67							
3.RUP	.34**	.34**	.78						
4.Promotion	.47**	.48**	-.02	.72					
5.Prevention	-.11	-.09	-.01	-.17*	.81				
6.E	.22*	.19*	.04	.25**	.23**	.89			
7.ES	.22*	.16	-.13	.28**	.04	.25**	.89		
8.PA	.51**	.47**	.21*	.55**	-.01	.38**	.13	.73	
9.NA	-.29**	-.21*	.20*	-.53**	.09	-.28**	-.68**	-.26**	.87
M	3.71	3.55	3.50	3.74	2.59	3.45	2.81	3.70	2.42
SD	3.71	3.55	3.50	3.74	2.59	3.45	2.81	3.70	2.42

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients among study variables (reliability estimates on main diagonal)

Note. For CPP, LTPP, RUP, Promotion, E, ES, PA, and NA, higher scores are indicative for elevated levels of the measured construct. A higher score on the Prevention scale is indicative for low levels of the assessed construct. CPP = Current Purposes Pursuing; LTPP = Long-term Purposes Pursuing; RUP = Recurrence of Unattained Pursuits; E = Extraversion; ES = Emotional Stability; PA = Positive Affect; NA = Negative Affect. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency values are presented on the main diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Motivational Persistence and Chronic Regulatory Focus

In order to determine the number of canonical functions to be interpreted we followed the three criteria recommended by Hair et al. (1998): the level of statistical significance, the magnitude of the canonical correlation and of the redundancy indexes.

In this case, only one of the two extracted canonical functions reached statistical significance (see Table 2), indicating that the common variance between the two pairs of canonical variates equals 34% ($r = .58$, Wilks $\lambda = .66$, $p < .001$). After inspecting the cross-loading values we can see that, on one hand, only promotion focus exhibited a noticeable correlation with the first variate and, on the other hand, only CPP and LTPP displayed at least moderate correlations with the second variate. More

precisely, higher scores on the CPP and LTPP subscales were linearly linked to higher scores on the Promotion subscale.

	Canonical function
R	0.58**
R ²	0.34
Cross loadings	
Motivational Persistence	
CPP	-0.47
LTPP	-0.48
RUP	0.02
Regulatory Focus	
Promotion	-0.58
Prevention	0.12
Redundancy coefficient for MP	0.15
Redundancy coefficient for RF	0.18

Table 2: Canonical correlation for Motivational Persistence and Regulatory Focus

Note: N = 123. CPP = Current Purposes Pursuing; LTPP = Long-term Purposes Pursuing; RUP = Recurrence of Unattained Purposes; MP = Motivational Persistence; RF = Regulatory Focus; **p < .001.

Motivational Persistence and Positive and Negative Affect

Both of the two extracted canonical correlations reached statistical significance (see Table 3), but only the first one accounted for a meaningful proportion of shared variance (34%) ($r = .58$, Wilks $\lambda = .59$, $p < .001$). This first pair of variates established a direct relationship between the CPP, LTPP and PA and an inversed link between the same two MP subscales and NA. Higher scores at CPP and LTPP are linked with higher scores at the PA subscale and, intuitively, with lower scores at the NA subscale.

Although the second function has little practical significance (11% of shared variance between the variates and substantially low redundancy – 0.04 for both variates), we considered that worth noting the direct relation between the RUP and NA ($r = .33$, Wilks $\lambda = .89$, $p = .001$). More precisely, high RUP is linearly linked with high NA.

	Canonical function 1	Canonical function 2
R	0.58**	0.33**
R ²	0.34	0.11
Cross loadings		
Motivational Persistence		
CPP	-0.54	0.05
LTPP	-0.47	0.09
RUP	-0.09	0.32
PANAS		
PA	-0.54	0.13
NA	0.35	0.26
Redundancy coefficient for MP	0.17	0.04
Redundancy coefficient for PANAS	0.21	0.04

Table 3: Canonical correlation for Motivational Persistence and Positive and Negative Affect

Note: N = 123. CPP = Current Purposes Pursuing; LTPP = Long-term Purposes Pursuing; RUP = Recurrence of Unattained Purposes; MP = Motivational Persistence; PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; PA = Positive Affect; NA = Negative Affect; **p < .001.

Motivational Persistence and Extraversion and Emotional Stability

The last explored relationship was between MP subscales and Extraversion and Emotional Stability scales from the Big Five personality model. Only one of the two extracted canonical functions reached statistical significance, indicating a modest 12% of common variance ($r = .34$, Wilks $\lambda = .86$, $p = .005$). Furthermore, the redundancy indexes are substantially low (.04 for the first variate and .07 for the second variate), both variable sets having a lower shared variance in the second function. Based on the revealed data we consider an attempt of interpretation hazardous.

IV. Discussion

The presented results indicate that trait persistence has commonalities to a promotion goal orientation. In other words, approaching pleasure may be associated more to the strength of goal pursuit than avoiding pain. This observation tends to discount the first presented possible supposition that promotion focused individuals are less able to keep their eyes on the prize as difficulties emerge and the likelihood of success decreases (Lieberman et al., 1999; Shah & Higgins, 1997). In turn, it favors the hypothesis that framing goals in terms of positive outcomes, ideals and aspirations could go hand in hand with the ability to maintain focus on extended goal trajectories. Thus, especially in the long run, positively framed goals could be beneficial, perhaps by refreshing the motivational resources when fatigue, strain, frustration, temptations or obstacles get in the way.

A possible explanation for these observed results could reside in the different way promotion and prevention individuals respond to successes and failure. It may be that intermediary “wins” experienced with elation, pride and cheerfulness, and other high-arousal emotions could mobilize more energy in the long run over relaxation and other low-intensity affect. In the same time, for promotion-focused individuals, temporary failure or losses seem to be, at least in light of previous studies, although less motivating, also less intense and painful (Idson et al., 2000; Förster et al., 2001; Freitas et al., 2002; Quinn & Olson, 2006), while in a prevention focus, it is positively related to self-handicapping, presumably as a self-protection strategy (Hendrix & Hirt, 2009).

Another interesting conclusion regards the association between persistence and affectivity, but it would be difficult to generate a directional hypothesis about these patterns of results. Inadequacies in the pursuit of willful strivings may cause distress and negative feelings; the relationship can work the other way around as documented by the literature on action-orientation, since inability to down-regulate negative feelings interferes with intention implementation and maintenance (Koole & Jostmann, 2004). Higher scores at CPP and LTPP are linked with higher scores at the PA subscale, and with lower scores at the NA subscale.

The associations found in this cross-sectional study are mainly weak to moderate, and all the motivation-related concepts were treated as general tendencies. The results, which build on the body of research concerning motivational persistence, could indicate that educating people to frame their goals in promotion terms may encourage commitment when it comes to goal strivings. Nevertheless, in the absence of further investigations, this study has limited practical implications. A more focused and nuanced analysis, with application on specific goals or tasks, should provide more useful conclusions. The role of situational demands and regulatory fit (Higgins et al., 2001) through longitudinal diary studies could also be an interesting area for exploration in relation to trait persistence.

This study also draws attention on the need to understand and explore in future studies the nature and role of the mechanism defining the RUP when it comes to sustaining or interfering with self-regulation. More complex, longitudinal designs, should consider intervening factors that determine the direction and strength of association between RUP and persistence. The degree of internalization of goals, the type of goal or self-regulation strategies, could be possible candidates for describing the conditions that allow accessibility of high value, internalized goals to sustain goal pursuit and for predicting low emotional well-being and perseverative psychopathologies.

Nevertheless, among the limitations that a cross-sectional correlational design brings, this present research has a series of other limitations: (1) first of all, the sample has a highly unbalanced gender distribution, being based on a majority of female participants, and making less possible the generalizability of results; (2) data collection was entirely based on an online procedure that in general is less trustworthy.

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