

Personality Traits Predict Proximal Goals Among Emerging Adults

Original Research

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Abstract

Introduction: Individuals often grapple with questions regarding how to accomplish their major life goals. In fact, selecting which goals to pursue is an important developmental task in emerging adulthood ¹. Personality traits have been shown to be associated with which major life goals adults pursue ². Little research, though, has examined whether these associations are present among the proximal goals emerging adults pursue.

Methods: The influence of personality traits on goal pursuit of emerging adults was examined, using data from 716 emerging adults ($M = 19.32$, $SD = 1.25$) who completed measures regarding proximal goals (e.g., health, socioemotional, spiritual/religious, and cognitive) and the Big Five personality traits.

Results: Using SEM, the model fit the data well, $\chi^2(17, N = 716) = 99.10, p < .001$. The overall omnibus model showed that higher neuroticism, openness to experience, and agreeableness contributed to the number of proximal goals emerging adults are currently pursuing. Post hoc analyses showed that different personality traits contributed to the goal domains that emerging adults pursue.

Conclusions: Personality may be a factor that enhances or undermines the motivation for the goals that emerging adults pursue ^{3,4}. Results are discussed in terms of how individual characteristics influence goal pursuit and how such activity might reinforce or further shape personality.

Key Words: Big Five, Goal Pursuit, SEM

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Introduction

The struggle to construct a blueprint for major life goals persists across the lifespan, but is particularly salient for emerging adults. Emerging adults, those ages 18 to 25 years, tend to think about their future once every 16 minutes ^{5,6}. In fact, selecting which goals to pursue is an important developmental task in emerging adulthood ¹. Much of the research examining goal pursuit in this demographic has focused on major life goals, such as having a prestigious job, enjoying romantic love, and having

an exciting lifestyle ^{2,7}. However, research has found that major life goal pursuit may change throughout emerging adulthood. For instance, a 20-year-old may pursue goals that are educational but may shift their goals to be vocational oriented as they progress through emerging adulthood ⁸. In order to better understand this shift of goal attainment and to better support emerging adults through this transitory life period, other life domains should be studied. Although the pathway to these outcomes may be unclear to the individual, research shows that major life goals are often realized as a function of accomplishing a series of proximal goals ⁹. It may be possible to better support and



empower emerging adults as they navigate toward their desired future outcomes by understanding how they approach their proximal goals and the individual difference factors that are associated with these goal pursuits.

Personality and Goal Pursuit

Self-determination theory suggests that people value and pursue long-term goals that enhance growth and psychological needs and that different processes underlie which goals people pursue^{3, 4}, such as how temporal perspectives affect our goal pursuits¹⁰. Personality traits are among the strongest linkages between these values and goal-directed behaviors². One potential domain for growth may be religious and spiritual goals. Research has shown that age and gender contribute to whether a person pursues religious and spiritual goals¹¹, but personality has not been examined in this relationship. Personality represents the relatively enduring thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are specific to an individual. They make up the characteristic way in which an individual responds to and shapes their environment. The most prominent personality theory, the Big Five¹², organizes personality traits into a super-factor model of five traits. These traits include neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness^{12, 13}. Although there are multiple ways in which to assess personality, one of the oldest and well-supported methods is through the use of self-report lexical measures, commonly known as adjective checklists¹⁴. With strong correlations among the various personality assessment instruments, there is strong evidence that regardless of how they are measured, personality traits influence which goals one values^{2, 15, 16}.

Emerging adults higher in extraversion or lower in openness to experience rate having a high-status career as important. Additionally, those higher in extraversion, agreeableness, or openness to experience rate social goals as especially important^{2, 15, 16}. Personality traits have also been shown to be related to specific health goals. For example, Reisz, Boudreaux, and Ozer¹⁷ found differential associations among the Big 5 traits and personal health goals. Emerging adults who were higher in extraversion, higher in agreeableness, higher in neuroticism, lower in conscientiousness, or lower in openness to experience reported having more health goals. Thus, personality traits influence major life goals and more proximal health goals.

It is unclear, however, whether and to what extent personality influences the selection of other proximal goals. Because successful completion of long-term goals may be a function of successfully accomplishing intervening, proximal goals^{10, 18}, it is important to identify whether personality traits influence the initial selection of such goals or whether personality is instrumental on completing these goals. Furthermore, studying personality traits in emerging adulthood is valuable because it has been suggested that, since development continues throughout the lifespan, emerging adulthood is a key period for personality development¹⁹.

Current Study

Although personality likely influences the choice of major life goals, it is unclear whether and to what extent personality influences the selection of proximal goals. As such, the current study examined whether the Big Five personality traits were associated with the proximal goals emerging adults report actively pursuing.

Scientific Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from a large mid-Atlantic university and completed a lengthy online survey. They received extra credit in a psychology course for their participation. Although the survey included a variety of measures, only those related to the current study are discussed in this report.

Of the 834 students who began the study, 96 were excluded from these analyses due to incomplete data. An additional 21 adults who were 26 years old or older were excluded because they were outside the age range considered to be emerging adulthood⁵. Thus, the final sample included 716 participants, 132 men (18.4%) and 584 women (81.6%), with an average age of 19.32 ($SD = 1.25$). Similar to the region and the institution, the majority were White/Caucasian (90.5%).

Measures

Number of goals and goal domains. To index proximal goals, we drew from the positive psychology and behavior change literature^{20, 21} to create a list of 28 behavior change goals. Participants indicated whether they were currently working on the 28 individual goals or not. Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1. Participants indicated that they were currently pursuing a mean of 18.82 goals ($SD = 6.29$).

Table 1. Pearson's correlations, means, and reliabilities

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	19.32 (1.25)	18-25		-										
2. Gender (0-male; 1-female)	81.6% female			-.17	-									
3. Neuroticism	2.60 (0.65)	1-5	.80	.02	.20	-								
4. Extraversion	3.30 (0.54)	1-5	.67	-.02	-.02	-.19	-							
5. Openness to experience	3.17 (0.46)	1-5	.70	-.00	.01	-.14	.47	-						
6. Conscientiousness	3.40 (0.50)	1-5	.75	-.04	.21	-.03	.04	-.09	-					
7. Agreeableness	3.53 (0.50)	1-5	.60	-.02	.16	-.05	.41	.36	.22	-				
8. Total number of goals	18.82 (6.29)	0-26		.03	.08	.16	.18	.23	-.01	.19	-			
9. Health goals	4.47 (1.32)	0-7		.11	-.01	.11	.13	.13	.13	.08	.66	-		
10. Socioemotional goals	7.74 (3.33)	0-12		.01	.12	.19	.13	.22	.06	.18	.93	.47	-	
11. Spiritual/religious goals	2.29 (1.47)	0-4		-.01	.08	.11	.19	.20	.02	.23	.78	.37	.66	-
12. Cognitive goals	2.15 (0.90)	0-3		.01	-.07	.06	.15	.16	.50	.10	.74	.44	.64	.48

Note. Bolded correlations are significant at $p < .05$

As detailed elsewhere ¹⁰, goal domains were established through a panel of experts. Seven behavioral goals were combined to form a count of *health goals*, including: lose/gain weight, increase exercise, reduce tobacco use, reduce alcohol use, eat healthier foods, sleep more/less, and walk more. *Socioemotional goals* included 12 behaviors: be kinder to others, be more assertive, be more social, control one's anger, be happier, meditate or relax, develop a new skill, better deal with stress, reduce one's stress, volunteer in the community, give money to charities, and be kinder to one's self. *Spiritual/religious goals* were indexed by combining the four goals of appreciate beauty, be more grateful, be more spiritual, and be more religious. *Cognitive goals* included three behavioral goals: make better decisions, study more, and improve one's memory.

Personality. The Big Five personality traits were measured using the Midlife Development Inventory (MIDI) ²², which was derived from other adjective check-lists of the Big Five. Using a 25-item adjective checklist, participants indicated how well each word described them, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). Four words, including moody and worrying, indexed neuroticism. Extraversion was assessed using five words, such as outgoing and friendly. Openness to experience was indexed using seven adjectives, like creative and curious. Conscientiousness included four adjectives, including organized and responsible. Agreeableness was indexed by five words, such as helpful and sympathetic. Item-means were computed, with higher scores representing higher levels of each trait. Means, alphas and inter-correlations are presented in Table 1. Of note, despite the moderate magnitude of some of the internal consistency indexes, these values are acceptable and to be expected based on the few number of items indexing each trait ²³.

Analytic Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine whether the Big Five personality traits were associated with the total number of goals and with each of the goal domains. SEM is a statistical technique that allows for the testing of multivariate relationships, both directly and indirectly. We used AMOS (v. 27.0.0) to test the structural model depicted in Figure 1. We used several indexes to assess the fit of the model to the data, including chi-square, for which nonsignificant values suggest a good fit. However, because chi-square is sensitive to minor deviations in samples larger than $N=200$, we also relied upon the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values $>.95$ suggest a good fit and values

above .90 are considered to be adequate²⁴. We also used the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) for which values < .08 are considered to be acceptable²⁴. In addition, we examined each path in the model and evaluated its standardized beta using the critical ratio (CR). CRs >1.96 are significant at the $p < .05$ level. Note, the measurement model in which the degree to which each of the four goal domains maps onto a general latent construct are shown at the top of Table 2. Because the measurement model exhibited good fit, no additional constraints or covariances were needed among the four goal domains. Individual regression paths between specific personality dispositions and Goals are presented in the lower half of that table.

Results

Preliminary Results

Prior to testing the model shown in Figure 1, preliminary analyses confirmed that the data met the underlying assumptions of the General Linear Model, met the criterion for multivariate normality, and contained no outliers. Because of the disparity in the number of males and females, a series of multi-group analyses were run to determine gender differences in personality traits predicting goal domains for emerging adults. No significant differences were detected and all analyses were conducted with a single group of participants.

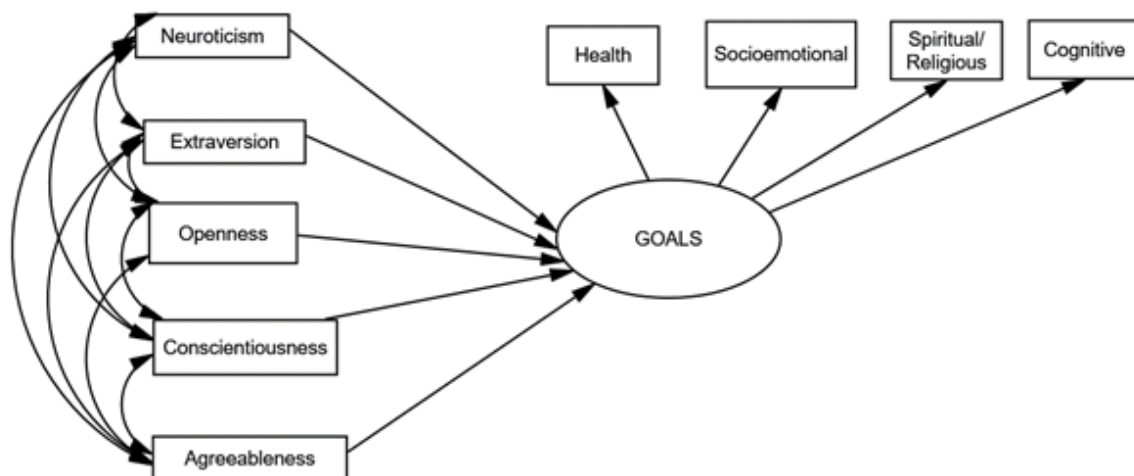


Figure 1. Proposed structural equation model testing the contributions of the Big Five personality traits on goals.

Total number of goals. The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(17, N = 716) = 99.10, p < .001, R^2 = .127$; CMIN = 99.01, CFI = .947, RMSEA = .082. The regression paths and covariances associated with the structural model are presented in the lower portion of Table 2. Examination of the standardized betas indicates that emerging adults who were higher in neuroticism ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), higher in openness to experience ($\beta = .20, p < .001$), or higher in agreeableness ($\beta = .12, p = .007$) reported more goals. Extraversion ($\beta = .07, p = .101$) and conscientiousness ($\beta = -.03, p = .484$) were not significantly associated with the number of goals. Because the fit indices suggested an acceptable model fit, we chose to forego model modifications. However, we did engage in post hoc analyses to explore the patterns of associations for specific goal domains.

Table 2. Regression paths and covariance of the structural model.
 $\chi^2 (17, N = 716) = 99.10, p < .001; R^2 = .127; GFI = .97; CFI = .947; RMSEA = .082$

Measurement Model			β	beta	S.E.	C.R.	p
health_goals	<---	GOALS	.531	1.000			
socialperson_goals	<---	GOALS	.913	4.319	.304	14.214	<.001
spiritual_goals	<---	GOALS	.722	1.511	.113	13.360	<.001
cog_goals	<---	GOALS	.699	.894	.068	13.131	<.001

			β	beta	S.E.	C.R.	p
Path Model							
GOALS	<---	Neuroticism	.229	.248	.044	5.589	<.001
GOALS	<---	Extraversion	.074	.096	.059	1.641	.101
GOALS	<---	Openness	.200	.306	.070	4.403	<.001
GOALS	<---	Conscientiousness	-.027	-.038	.055	-.700	.484
GOALS	<---	Agreeableness	.118	.167	.062	2.699	.007
Covariances							
Conscientiousness	<-->	Agreeableness	.221	.055	.009	5.766	<.001
Openness	<-->	Agreeableness	.357	.081	.009	8.993	<.001
Extraversion	<-->	Agreeableness	.411	.111	.011	10.172	<.001
Neuroticism	<-->	Agreeableness	-.047	-.015	.012	-1.252	.210
Openness	<-->	Conscientiousness	.085	.019	.009	2.258	.024
Extraversion	<-->	Conscientiousness	.043	.012	.010	1.151	.250
Neuroticism	<-->	Conscientiousness	-.033	-.011	.012	-.878	.380
Extraversion	<-->	Openness	.467	.117	.010	11.317	<.001
Neuroticism	<-->	Openness	-.139	-.041	.011	-3.674	<.001
Neuroticism	<-->	Extraversion	-.186	-.066	.013	-4.882	<.001

Post Hoc Analyses

Each goal domain was examined individually to determine if personality traits explain each goal domain within a separate model. We conducted a series of post hoc analyses, dropping covariances that were not significant in the main model. Thus, the following set of path analyses represent models in which all five personality traits were used to explain variance in each of the four goal domains individually, allowing seven covariances. Neuroticism was permitted to covary with extraversion and openness; extraversion was also covaried with openness and agreeableness; openness covaried with conscientiousness and agreeableness; and conscientiousness was permitted to covary with agreeableness. The test models fit the data adequately, with $\chi^2 (3; N = 716) = 3.00, p = .392$. Because the chi square suggested no differences between the tested model and that which underlies the data, no additional fit indices were required.

Health goals. Although fitting the data well, the model testing the association between personality and health goals explained a small amount of variance, $R^2 = .064$. Emerging adults who were higher in neuroticism ($\beta = .136, p < .001$), higher in extraversion ($\beta = .094, p = .029$), higher in openness to experience ($\beta = .100, p = .017$) or lower in conscientiousness ($\beta = -.148, p < .001$) reported more health goals. Agreeableness did not significantly relate to health goals ($\beta = .045, p = .281$).

Socioemotional goals. The model testing the association between personality and socioemotional goals accounted for a small of variance, $R^2 = .111$. Emerging adults who were higher in neuroticism ($\beta = .229, p < .001$), higher in openness to experience ($\beta = .190, p < .001$), or higher in agreeableness ($\beta = .960, p = .0185$) reported more socioemotional goals. Extraversion ($\beta = .040, p = .343$) and conscientiousness ($\beta = .030, p = .412$) were not significantly associated with the number of socioemotional goals.

Spiritual/religious goals. The model examining the fit between personality and spiritual/religious accounted for 9.9% of the variance. Standardized betas indicated that those who were higher in neuroticism ($\beta = .151, p < .001$), extraversion ($\beta = .093, p = .029$), openness to experiences ($\beta = .125, p = .002$), or agreeableness ($\beta = .162, p < .001$) reported more



spiritual/religious goals. Conscientiousness ($\beta = -.03, p = .408$) was not significantly associated with the number of reported spiritual/religious goals.

Cognitive goals. Finally, the model examining the relations between personality and cognitive goals was accounted for 6.5% of the variance. Those who were higher in neuroticism ($\beta = .088, p = .017$), higher in extraversion ($\beta = .089, p = .040$), higher in openness to experience ($\beta = .126, p = .003$) or lower in conscientiousness ($\beta = -.152, p < .001$) reported more cognitive goals. Agreeableness was not significantly associated with cognitive goals ($\beta = .053, p = .202$).

Discussion

Emerging adulthood is a time when individuals often think about their future and the goals that they want to accomplish^{5,6}. Using community samples, previous research has shown that temporal perspective matters for health goals¹⁰, and that age and gender matter for spiritual/religious goals¹¹. The current paper focuses solely on emerging adults and factors that may contribute to their goal pursuits. In order to support emerging adults, it is essential to identify the role of individual differences, such as personality, in determining the number and types of goals emerging adults pursue. As such, the current study examined whether individual differences in the Big Five personality traits were associated with the total number of proximal goals and whether personality was associated with these goals in specific life domains. Future research examining this topic may want to assess if class standing (e.g. sophomore, senior) plays a role in the goals that emerging adults pursue. The overall omnibus model showed that higher neuroticism, higher openness to experience, and higher agreeableness contributed to the number of proximal goals that emerging adults are currently pursuing. Building on the results of Roberts and Robins², our results show that different proximal goals are associated with specific personality traits. For example, higher levels of neuroticism and openness to experience, reported pursuing more goals in general, more health, socioemotional, spiritual/religious, and cognitive goals. Higher levels of agreeableness and extraversion were also associated with endorsement of specific goals. Lastly, those with higher levels of conscientiousness reported few health and cognitive goals.

Neuroticism. Those who endorsed higher levels of neuroticism reported pursuing more goals in general, and more health, socioemotional, spiritual/religious, and cognitive goals. Those who are higher in neuroticism may actively pursue more proximal goals because they are healthy neurotics^{25,26}. Healthy neuroticism may lead people to act in protective ways, such as exercising or seeking out care from a primary care physician²⁵. In essence, neuroticism could be healthy if it encourages a person to become more attentive to their health goals²⁶. The notion of healthy neuroticism could extend to non-health goals, and may be the reason those higher in neuroticism endorsed more goals. For example, those higher in neuroticism may have more social strain²⁷, and may endorse more socioemotional goals to counteract that social strain.

Extraversion. Emerging adults who were higher in extraversion reported pursuing more health, spiritual/religious, and cognitive goals. Extraversion was not significantly associated with socioemotional goals. Socioemotional goals may not be a goal for extraverts because people higher in extraversion prefer jobs that have a social aspect to them²⁸. This may be due to the fact that since being outgoing, friendly, and talkative are already a part of their identity, they do not feel the need to work on this goal further.

Openness to Experience. Consistent with previous research¹⁷, emerging adults who endorsed higher levels of openness to experience reported pursuing more total proximal goals and more goals in each of the four domains. It is possible that emerging adults who are higher in openness to experience actively pursue more goals because they are trying to be more broadminded or adventurous in their proximal pursuits, which would be consistent with their identities of being open to try new things.

Conscientiousness. As in Reis et al.¹⁷, emerging adults who were higher in conscientiousness reported fewer health goals. They also reported fewer cognitive goals, as well. It is possible that emerging adults who are higher in conscientiousness are self-disciplined and do not undertake more goals than they can efficiently focus on. Conscientiousness was also not significantly related to socioemotional goals, and this may be because emerging adults high in conscientiousness are already excelling in their social relationships^{27,29}. It is also possible that emerging adults who are higher in conscientiousness are already successfully managing their behavior, and therefore, do not perceive a need for changing their current behavior.

Agreeableness. Contrary to previous research¹⁷, agreeableness was significantly associated with actively pursuing more goals instead of fewer. The proximal goals endorsed by individuals higher in agreeableness may reflect that these



emerging adults are interested in improving their person and focus on themselves (socioemotional and religious/spiritual goals). People higher in agreeableness tend to want to maintain harmony within their social groups¹². By having more socioemotional goals, agreeable people may feel they want to work to continue the positive relationships they have with others and feel like they want to improve themselves.

Conclusions

The current study adds to the literature in numerous ways. Previous literature tends to focus on whether personality is associated with viewing goals as important or on major life goals such as marriage and career^{2,7}. It is important to extend research to include the influence of personality on emerging adults' active pursuit of proximal goals because it is possible that emerging adults select goals to pursue that are consistent with their personalities, which may be beneficial or detrimental depending on which personality traits they endorse. For example, emerging adults may be setting themselves up for failure by attempting to pursue too many proximal goals and this may be influenced by their personality. Future work should examine how many of these various goals individuals achieve and the consequent effect on their wellbeing.

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