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Well-Doing: Personal Projects as Virtuous Action

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Well-Doing: Personal Projects as Virtuous Action

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Abstract

“What are you doing?” and “How are you doing?” are two foundational questions we can ask of agents. They elicit answers that illuminate aspects of what I call well-doing, or felicitous action. In this paper I propose that well-doing can be measured by examining an individual’s personal projects. Personal projects are constitutive elements of daily lives and can range from the trivial pursuits of rainy Thursdays to the overarching aspirations of a lifetime. They can be assessed by Personal Projects Analysis (PPA), a methodology that contrasts markedly with orthodox approaches to measurement. PPA provides modules for assessing the content, appraisal, impact and dynamics of the personal projects being pursued by individuals. In contrast with traditional questionnaire measurement of virtues, PPA involves "thick" descriptions of how virtue is embodied in daily action and embedded in social, physical and temporal contexts. Each of these contexts can be assessed with PPA methodology, including the extent to which each project is hierarchically linked to higher order values and lower order actions. While we need to be circumspect about methodological matters when it comes to questions of virtue, there does seem to be some promise in this alternative approach.

Introduction:

It is important to differentiate the “having” and the “doing” aspects of personality (Allport, 1937, Cantor, 1998). The former is studied by trait psychology and examines stable dispositions that individuals “have,” such as extraversion or neuroticism. The latter is studied by theories that focus on the action of everyday life such as the personal projects that reflect and express individuals’ personalities (Little, 1983). Both approaches have significant contributions to make to the study of well-being and virtue. The contributions of trait psychology to this venture are well known albeit contentious (Kristjansson, 2013). I am going to sketch out the case for personal projects (Little, 1983; Little, Salmelo-Aro & Phillips, 2007). More specifically, I am proposing that on both theoretical and methodological grounds, the study of the doings of daily lives allows us greater scope for reflection on well-being and virtue than the study of the havings of those who are doing the doing.

Personal Projects: A Conceptual Overview

Personal projects are extended sets of personally salient action in context. They are constituent elements of daily lives. They can range from the routine tasks of rainy Thursdays to the overarching aspirations of a lifetime, from “put out the dog” to “liberate my people”. We may initiate our projects or they may be thrust upon us. They may be individualistic pursuits or communal ones. Some of our projects may bring us utter joy and others may bring us to our knees. Our core projects, those in which we are particularly and singularly invested, may be sustainable pursuits or they may fall seriously short of our aspirations. In short, as I will explain later, our well-being reflects

the state of affairs of our personal projects. We might say, indeed, that human well-being is contingent upon well-doing.

Philosophers have used personal projects to illustrate issues critical to moral philosophy. For example, Williams (1982) in his critique of utilitarian and Kantian accounts of morality claimed that individuals have “ground projects” in their lives that make that life worth living and without which it may seem futile to carry on. Lomasky (1987) has proposed a theory of rights based on a detailed analysis of project pursuit. More recently, the normative claim of personal projects has received extensive treatment by Betzler (2013) and Tiberius (2010) has made personal projects a key component of reflective wisdom. Although the psychological research on personal projects did not derive explicitly from these philosophical perspectives it is clear that there is considerable conceptual overlap.

Personal Projects as Units of Analysis for Personality Science

A rationale and methodology for personal projects analysis was originally proposed by Little (1983). It emerged, in part, as a response to the person-environment debate in psychology and provided an alternative to locating either persons or environments (situations) as the prime source of influence on human conduct. Because personal projects are intimately linked to both the propensities of individuals and the contexts within which action emerges, their analysis provided a way of integrating and reconciling conflicting perspectives on personality that had become unnecessarily divisive. The larger framework within which PPA was developed was a social ecological one, illustrated in Figure 1. Within this larger framework, personal projects are postulated as convergence points between stable and dynamic features of persons and environments in predicting human flourishing. While acknowledging that persons

and environments have direct influence upon the quality of lives, the framework draws particular attention to the content, appraisal and dynamics of personal projects.

The Methodology of Personal Projects Analysis (PPA)

PPA methodology is based on a set of propaedeutic criteria briefly summarized in Table 1. These criteria differ considerably from those guiding traditional measurement in personality psychology, especially trait psychology. Although not the prime concern of this paper, I will allude to some of them as I describe the PPA procedure and its research agenda.

PPA begins by asking individuals to list their current personal projects. Typically individuals generate about fifteen projects phrased in their idiosyncratic language. They range from the ubiquitous “lose weight” to the singular “Be a better Druid,” and from the seemingly trivial pursuits of daily life to the magnificent obsessions that define our lives (Little, 1989). But most elicited personal projects are in the middle range between these extremes. They are the everyday pursuits that give meaning and structure to our lives. The most frequent kind of projects that are elicited are academic/work, interpersonal, health, recreational and intrapersonal projects. Intrapersonal projects are of particular interest because they are frequently concerned with changing oneself and with themes that seem relevant to virtuous pursuit (e.g. “be more generous,” “try to procrastinate less”). There is evidence that a person whose life is focused primarily on such projects is more prone to depressive mood (Little, 1989; Salmela-Aro, 1987). But there is also evidence that such projects are also associated with creativity, at least for some individuals. In short, for some people projects of the self are demanding tasks, for others they are exploratory adventures.

The second step in PPA asks the participant to rate each of her personal projects on a set of seventeen appraisal dimensions. Early factor analytic research suggested that there were five major factors underlying these appraisal dimensions:

Meaning: e.g. enjoyment, self-identity, value congruence, absorption

Structure: e.g. control, time adequacy, initiation, positive/negative impact,

Efficacy: e.g. progress, likelihood of successful outcome, competence

Community: e.g. others' view of importance, visibility to others

Stress: e.g. challenge, stress, difficulty

Score on these factors have been strong and reliable predictors of diverse measures of well-being, exceeding those levels typically achieved by socio-economic indicators. Life goes well if one's projects are meaningful and manageable, connected with others and if they provide a favorable balance of positive to negative affect. Although similar levels of predictability are achieved by trait measures it is important to underscore two points. First, whereas traits are regarded as relatively stable features of individuals, personal projects are dynamic features. Personal projects can be modified, simplified, or made more expansive. We can abandon our projects or at least set them aside for a more propitious time. This tractability of personal projects, relative to traits means that it has a considerable advantage in applying it to applied domains as well as to studies of virtue. Second, it has been shown that the linkage between traits and well-being is mediated by the personal projects people are pursuing (Albuquerque & Pedrosa Lima, 2013). Although considerably more research need to be done the evidence to date suggest that if we remove the influence of personal project appraisals trait measures no longer predict well-being. Doings, in a sense, trump havings in the prediction of the quality of lives.

Several of the dimensions of PPA have direct applicability to questions of virtue and flourishing. Consider, for example, the dimensions of value congruency (how consistent with your core values is this project) and self-identity (to what extent is this project expressive of your self—like a personal trademark). The mean scores (0-10) on value congruency are consistently the highest of any of the personal project dimensions. People engage in projects that they construe to be estimable ventures for them. Of course others might disagree. But this can be readily explored by having independent judges evaluate the value of another person's pursuits.

Self-identity assess the extent to which projects are self-expressive and research with adolescents reveals some interesting patterns as to what projects provide a sense of identity (Little, 1987). Those projects rated highest on self-identity for adolescents are notable for their emphasis on others—on intimacy and compassion. The three highest were intimate relations (sex, boy-friend girl-friend projects), spiritual projects and, highest of all—community projects which were largely involved with volunteering projects. I have elsewhere speculated that these patterns are suggestive that instead of a sense of communion requiring prior achievement of a sense of personal identity, the two might well be co-constituted. It is in being engaged with others that I define and clarify my emerging sense of self (Little, 1987).

Cross-Impact and Laddering Modules

Two additional modules provide information on the systemic properties of personal projects and the hierarchical structure of personal action.

The Cross-Impact technique asks participants to complete, in matrix form, ratings of the degree of impact that each project has on others within their system. This allows us to identify those projects that are centrally located within the project system as a whole and those that are more peripheral. We can also apply the same logic to

examining how one person's projects impact on those of others such as romantic partners.

Some personal projects are so central to the project system that individuals are unwilling to give them up because the rest of their projects would be compromised. We call these core projects. One of our basic assumptions is that well-being is contingent upon the sustainable pursuit of core projects and I will turn to this in the final section.

The laddering module of PPA asks individuals to consider each project in terms of two questions. First, we ask "Why are engaged in this project?" After each answer we ask the question again, iteratively. Some individuals will stop at one ladder rung. They are engaged in the project because it is a terminal value for them. For others, the same project may be routed through a more extended set of higher order accounts. They then proceed, in similar fashion to answering the question "How are you going to work on this project", proceeding once more through an iterative process until reaching a schedulable act. The results of these laddering procedures allow us to address what we have called the "meaning-manageability tradeoff" in project pursuit. Some individuals tilt in the direction of meaning in their personal projects, others tilt toward managing their projects effectively. Theoretically there is an optimal strategy in which both meaning and manageability are achieved, but this is still an open empirical question.

The Sustainable Pursuit of Core Projects: Free Traits and Restorative Niches

Sometimes our core projects require us to act out of character. For example, a highly introverted teacher who is passionate about his field and wants to ignite his students' interest may act uncharacteristically extraverted in his class. He engages in what I call free-trait behavior, in contrast to the relatively fixed traits espoused by traditional trait theorists. A normally pleasant and agreeable woman steels herself to

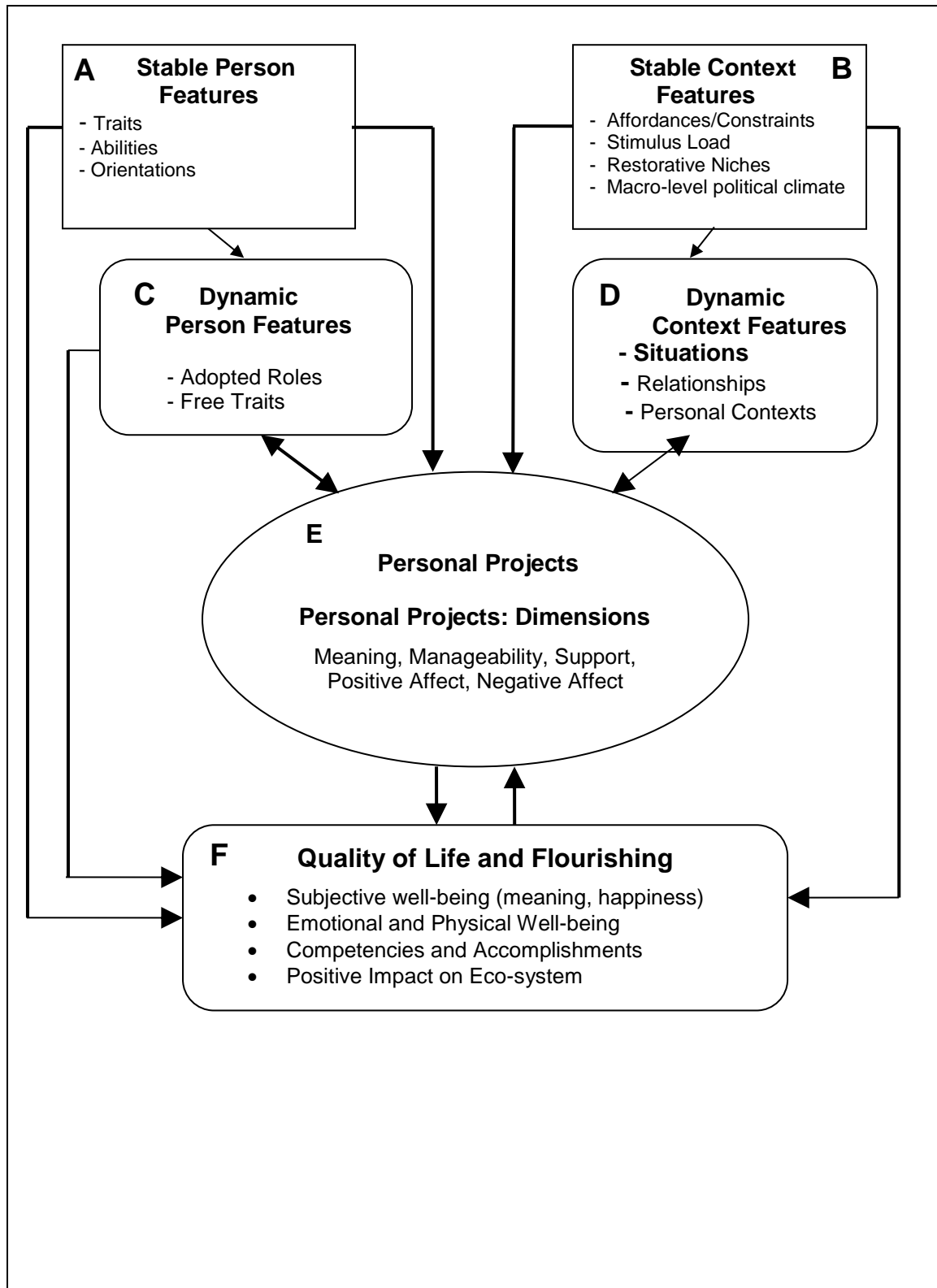
be confrontational and decidedly unpleasant while attempting to redress an egregious wrong that her aging mother has experienced. The enactment of free traits advances our well-being because it sustains our core projects. But they may also take a toll on us. The introverted teacher, at the break, may need to seek out a restorative niche in which he can indulge his more basic introverted needs (I have found the men's restroom very helpful for such purposes!). Protractedly acting out of character through the enactment of free traits, then, can have salutary effects. But unless the social ecology affords the opportunity of restorative niches acting out of character can bring us to our knees.

I hope to have given some plausibility to the view that PPA can provide an alternative methodological perspective through which we might view issues on virtue. By locating the distinctive sources of individual's personality in the projects they pursue we are able to address issues that are more difficult to ask, let alone answer, by conventional trait assessment. Given the conceptual investment that contemporary philosophers are making with respect to personal projects the prospect of interdisciplinary collaboration is highly attractive—a project worthy of spirited and sustainable pursuit.

Figure 1

A Social Ecological Model of Human Flourishing

(based on Little, 1989)



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