

Life Tasks and Daily Life Experience

Nancy Cantor

Julie Norem

University of Michigan

Northeastern University

Christopher Langston, Sabrina Zirkel, William

Fleeson, and Carol Cook-Flannagan

University of Michigan

ABSTRACT This article explores the assumption that the goals on which an individual works structure the experience of daily life. One set of important goals are those consensual tasks that reflect the age-graded expectations of a living environment (e.g., the task of being on one's own at college). Whereas most members of a common age group share these consensual life tasks, individuals in a group differ in the relative importance they place on different tasks and in their appraisals of them. In the present study of 54 women living in a college sorority, the importance of a life task was associated with increased relevance of the task to daily life events, as revealed in experience sampling. The women were more emotionally involved in events that they saw as highly relevant to their life tasks than in less relevant events and, for each person, positive affect and emotional involvement in task-relevant events were related to her initial life task appraisals.

A critical issue when studying personality and daily life experience is to find units of analysis that simultaneously reflect the personality of the individual and the features of the life context in which daily life experience takes shape (Caspi, Bolger, & Eckenrode, 1987; Magnusson

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& Endler, 1977; Wright & Mischel, 1987). One promising approach to this interactionist mandate is to focus on the self-articulated goals of individuals—the things that people see themselves as working on and caring about in their current lives (Pervin, 1989). These are the *current concerns* that consume people's thoughts and guide their attention selectively (Klinger, 1975); the *personal strivings* that motivate their activity choices and behavior (Emmons, 1986); the *personal projects* that organize actions in the service of a desired outcome (Little, 1983); and the common age-graded *life tasks* which individuals pursue in unique ways (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987).

Although these various perspectives approach goals from somewhat different angles, they share the basic assumption that what a person is trying to do in a situation has a significant impact in organizing his or her behavior (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990). A person's goals serve both as a guide in the choice of activities and as a framework for interpreting day-to-day events. For example, the ways in which a college student experiences an evening in the library will depend in large part on whether he or she is trying to get good grades or to widen a network of friends. As Kelly (1955) suggested, personal constructs channel experience selectively in predictable ways. Individuals' goals represent a set of very salient personal constructs. Therefore, these goals should be considered in an analysis of the experience of daily life.

Conversely, the meaning of goals is shaped by the opportunities available to a person in his or her daily life. Just as the meaning of an event is shaped by the goal that a person is trying to accomplish, so too is the goal responsive to and reflective of the life context within which it can be pursued (Veroff, 1983). Whereas two late adolescents may share the task of becoming independent, the meaning of this task for their daily life experience may differ strikingly if one is reacting to the norms of marriage and family and the other to the demands of college and career (Block, 1973). In this way, personal goals and life events take on meaning for individuals simultaneously, and they need to be studied in combination as they emerge in particular life contexts.

Consensual Life Tasks and Individuals

One approach to the study of personal goals that is firmly based within the sociocultural context of individuals' lives is that of life-span theorists who posit age-graded tasks that are normative for people living

within a shared setting (Erikson, 1950; Havighurst, 1953). As members of families or participants in organizations like the army or a school, individuals learn about the tasks that are considered appropriate for them to address at each stage in life (Higgins & Parsons, 1983). Thus, young adults know that they should carve an identity independent of family, although the specific form that this age-graded task takes in their daily life will be tailored to the particular opportunities and demands of their significant social environment. Moreover, these age-graded tasks provide only a broad agenda for individuals, who still will differ considerably in the tasks that they place particular value on as self-relevant, in the time and place in life that they choose to work on the task, and in the ways in which they do that work (e.g., the activities that they pursue as task-relevant). Age-graded tasks provide an abstract plan for individuals' energy and commitments; it is still very much up to individuals to personalize these tasks in ways that organize and give added meaning to their daily life activities.

In our analysis of life tasks, therefore, we begin with the assumption that individuals of particular ages, living together in specific social groups, share an understanding of the life tasks that are deemed appropriate for their current age and living environment. As many others have noted, late adolescents living in a college environment, for example, share tasks such as living away from home, finding intimacy, and settling on a career goal, that organize their daily activities and give added meaning to these routines (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Stewart & Healy, 1985). These are tasks that students say they are working hard to master; tasks that represent avenues of self-expression and even of self-development (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). Nonetheless, these are also life tasks that students approach in importantly different ways as they go about their daily activities.

Individuals give personal meaning to these consensual life tasks in several important ways. First, although most people living in a shared social environment are aware of these consensual age-graded tasks, individuals choose among these tasks the ones that they personally view as important at any particular time in life. Thus, one college student may see the task of finding an intimate partner as a critical one for the college years, whereas another student may put his or her energies into building a wide network of friends rather than in forging a close personal relationship at this time. Such individual differences in the relative importance of different age-graded tasks presumably derive from sev-

eral sources, including dispositional differences in social motives (e.g., McAdams, 1982), differences in family values that shape life choices (e.g., R. H. Moos & B. S. Moos, 1976), and differences in the shared interests of the particular peers with whom the person interacts on a daily basis (e.g., Cantor & Fleeson, 1991). As individuals gain experience in pursuing such tasks in a particular life environment, they also change the priorities that they place on their various tasks, such that one student who attended to "social matters" early on in college may shift his or her focus to career goals as time goes on (Stewart, 1989).

Individuals may also differ in their beliefs or expectancies about working on these consensual tasks (e.g., how hard it is to make friends; how rewarding it is to work on getting good grades). Individuals' beliefs about tasks such as these undoubtedly reflect their unique histories of experiences in relevant events (Bandura, 1986) and their dispositional orientations more generally (Scheier & Carver, 1985). In turn, these beliefs, which we call their *life task appraisals*, influence their strategies for pursuing the task (e.g., Norem, 1989), their emotional experiences in task-relevant events (e.g., Zirkel & Cantor, 1990), and their ways of evaluating success or failure on the tasks (e.g., Langston & Cantor, 1989). Further, task appraisals should influence the ways in which individuals cope with relevant life events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The present article focuses on the influence of individuals' life task appraisals on their emotional reactions to daily life events and their subsequent reports of life satisfaction.

Importance and Life Task Relevance

As has often been noted (e.g., Magnusson, 1981), most events are open to multiple interpretations that depend upon the goals and desires of the participants. How a person experiences an event is frequently determined by what he or she is trying to accomplish (e.g., an evening alone at home means entirely different things depending on whether the person construes it as a time to unwind or as a statement about his social inadequacy). Alternate construals of events depend in part on an individual's particular life tasks. Though individuals pursue many life tasks at any given time, they tend also to have some tasks that they view as particularly important (Klinger, 1989; McAdams & Constantian, 1983).

We predict that personally important life tasks should influence the experience of daily events more than less important tasks. In the present

analysis, we examine the daily life experiences of a group of sorority women, with the expectation that they will share consensual life tasks such as making friends, finding intimacy, and getting good grades. We expect, however, that they will differ in the relative importance of these tasks. Thus getting good grades might be more important than finding intimacy for some individuals, while making friends is paramount to all other tasks for other individuals. Task importance is a general or abstract concept, but its influence can be seen in concrete form in individuals' interpretations of day-to-day events. We predict, for example, that the importance of each task to each individual will be reflected in her perception of the relevance of that task in daily life events. Specifically, the more important a particular task is in general to an individual, the more frequently she should see it as relevant to commonplace events in her daily life.

In addition, life task relevance should have a qualitative effect on the experience of daily life events. Specifically, daily life events that are highly relevant to an individual's current life tasks should be experienced as more emotionally involving than events that are less relevant to these tasks. Thus we expect that the particular events that are seen as highly task-relevant may vary from person to person. Each individual will interpret some daily events as highly relevant to her tasks and some events as less relevant, and her emotional involvement should differ significantly as a function of task relevance.

Life Task Appraisals and Daily Life Emotions

When a person works, day-to-day, on a life task, the experience she has should be influenced not only by the actual outcomes of the moment, but also by her prior beliefs about that task. If, for example, she generally finds making friends quite stressful and feels that getting good grades is hard but also especially rewarding, then she should derive more positive affect and feel more emotionally involved in events that she sees as relevant to her grades task as compared with her friends task. We expect that individuals' appraisals of their life tasks will contribute to their emotions in events that they see as relevant to those tasks.

There are many dimensions of meaning that people associate with their life tasks that probably contribute in this way to the nature of daily life experience. For example, Emmons and King (1988) demonstrated that when individuals felt conflict and ambivalence about their personal

strivings, these appraisals were reflected in the experience of stress on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, Palys and Little (1983) found that individuals were more satisfied with their lives when they pursued personal projects that they viewed as important but relatively closed-ended. In prior work, we (Cantor et al., 1987) have found that appraisals of task difficulty and of the enjoyment and personal control associated with a task had consequences for the emotions experienced in task-relevant events. For example, Zirkel and Cantor (1990) showed that college students who appraised the task of being independent as important, but also very difficult and unrewarding, experienced more negative emotions in those events than did their less independence-absorbed peers. Moreover, the literature on performance and extrinsic motivation suggests that to the extent that individuals focus on the evaluative outcomes of their task efforts, their involvement in and enjoyment of those tasks plummet (Harackiewicz, 1989). All of these dimensions of life task appraisal should, therefore, influence an individual's particular emotional experience in daily life.

One way to see the contribution of life task appraisals to emotions is to look within-subject. According to this view, even if a person finds her life tasks in general to be less rewarding than most people do, she may still have life tasks that for her are rewarding ones (as compared to her unrewarding tasks), and we would expect her daily life emotions in events relevant to those rewarding tasks to be more positive than in events relevant to her less rewarding tasks. Similarly, we expect that individuals will feel less positive affect in events they see as relevant to their "difficult" life tasks, as compared to their experience of events relevant to tasks that they personally see as easier. In the present study, we examined these life task appraisal-daily life emotions relationships using a within-subject approach.

Appraisals and Emotions Contributing to Life Satisfaction

Pursuing this approach further, it seems likely that life satisfaction in domains that correspond to life tasks will reflect both the contribution of individuals' recent experiences in those tasks, and their prior beliefs about the tasks. The literature on daily life events (e.g., DeLongis, 1982) supports the view that day-to-day experience is reflected in life satisfaction and perceived stress, and in the present study this should

imply an association for each sorority member between her emotions in task-relevant events and her subsequent assessments of satisfaction in relevant domains (e. g., positive affect experienced in intimacy task-relevant events should increase satisfaction with romantic life). Additionally, life task appraisals should have an influence on life satisfaction in two ways—directly, and indirectly through their influence on those daily life emotions. The more direct influence of appraisals on satisfaction derives from the persistence of beliefs about tasks over and above the actual experience of those tasks. If a sorority member sees her grades task as relatively less rewarding than her intimacy task, she may persist in feeling more satisfied about her romantic life than about her academic life, even though in a given week she may actually experience more positive affect while working on grades than on intimacy. These within-subject appraisal to satisfaction relationships were also tested in the following study.

METHOD

Overview

In order to explore these issues, we collected data in a residential undergraduate sorority over the course of a semester. In the first phase of the data collection, the women completed a lengthy questionnaire which included, among other measures, a life task assessment and a standardized measure of perceived daily life stress. In the second phase of the study, event-sampling and diary techniques were used for an intensive view of daily life. At the end of the semester another questionnaire was administered, assessing performance and subjective satisfaction in 15 life domains and reassessing perceived daily life stress. The present report focuses on the relationship of life task appraisals to the students' emotional experience of task-relevant daily events and on the relationship of that daily life emotional experience to life satisfaction and stress.

Subjects

Subjects were obtained by recruiting a residential campus sorority as a whole. The sorority was paid \$1,500 for the participation of its members. Of the approximately 70 women residing in the sorority, 57 initially agreed to participate (10 sophomores, 29 juniors, and 18 seniors), and 54 completed all three phases of the study. Subjects who completed the entire research project received as compensation the alarm watch used in the experience sampling.

Procedure

Questionnaire 1

Questionnaire 1, administered early in the fall term, included among other instruments, life task appraisal measures (Cantor et al., 1987) and the Cohen, Kamarick, and Mermelstein (1983) Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The PSS is a 14-item self-report measure of experiences of stress in the previous month. Subjects were given the 1- to 2-hour questionnaire and asked to fill it out and return it within 1 week.

Task listing. The life task assessment began with a free listing of current life tasks in which the subjects were given the following brief instructions and asked to generate 10 of their current life tasks:

One way to think about goals is to think about "current life tasks." For example, imagine a retired person. The following three life tasks might emerge for the individual as he or she faces this difficult time: (1) being productive without a job; (2) shaping a satisfying role with grown children and their families; and (3) enjoying leisure time and activities. These specific tasks constitute important goals since the individual's energies will be directed towards solving them.

Task coding. After listing their own life tasks, subjects were then presented with seven life tasks that had emerged from pilot interviews and from prior research as representative for this college student sample (Cantor et al., 1987). They were asked to match their life tasks with as many of these seven consensual life tasks as seemed appropriate to them. The consensual tasks were "doing well academically; getting good grades," "establishing goals for the future; making decisions for the future," "making friends; getting along with others," "being involved with someone; finding intimacy-dating," "being on your own; away from family," "being a member of the sorority," and "physical maintenance: dieting, exercise, and health." The sorority women were able to match 69% of their tasks with the consensual tasks.

Appraisals. Questionnaire 1 also assessed each subject's appraisal of each of the seven consensual tasks. Ratings of each task were obtained on 15 meaning dimensions adapted from prior work (importance, enjoyment, difficulty, control, initiative, stress, other's view, progress, challenge, time spent, ambivalence, conflict, extrinsic value, [desire to] achieve satisfaction, and [desire to] avoid unhappiness [after Little, 1983; Cantor et al., 1987]). Subjects provided these appraisal ratings on 9-point scales, representing the extent to which each dimension characterized each task for them (e.g., "How stressful is it for you to carry out the task of finding intimacy?").

In order to obtain a smaller set of appraisal rating dimensions for subsequent use, a factor analysis, using principal axis factorization and varimax rotation, was performed. For this purpose, each subject's appraisal ratings were averaged over the seven life tasks and these averaged ratings were factor-analyzed. The factor analysis produced three factors with eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 50% of the common variance. Appraisal dimensions with loadings above .45 on the first factor were conflict, stress, difficulty, time spent, and challenge. This factor was interpreted as representing aspects of the *difficulty* of the life task. The second factor, interpreted as representing the *rewardingness* of the task, included the following dimensions with loadings above .45: progress, enjoyment, initiative, control, and importance. A third factor contained three saliently loading dimensions—extrinsic value, avoid unhappiness, and achieve satisfaction—interpreted as representing aspects of *outcome evaluation*. The first two factors are similar to those obtained in previous analyses of college students' life task appraisals (Cantor et al., 1987; Cantor & Langston, 1989). The third factor seemed to reflect a heightened concern with the outcome of tasks that is consistent with the literature on performance evaluation and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, & Sansone, 1984). Given the convergent support for this pattern in the literature, three factor indices were created for each life task by taking the unweighted means of the saliently loading variables for each factor, within each life task.¹

Event-sampling and daily diary phase

During the second phase of the study subjects reported on the events and experiences in their daily lives over a 15-day period. Subjects turned in each day's materials the subsequent morning, allowing us to monitor compliance with procedures and encourage timely reporting.

Apparatus. In order to capture a random sampling of subjects' experiences in as naturalistic a manner as possible, each subject was provided with a digital

1. Because the subject-to-variable ratio is on the low end for factor analysis, we also performed a cluster analysis (requiring fewer subjects) on the same variables. The proximity measure used was correlation, and the clustering method was to maximize the average between-cluster interitem distance. The cluster analysis produced five clusters: three clusters replicating the factor analysis (with the exception of the importance dimension, which clustered with the difficulty dimensions), and two individual variables, which did not load highly on any factor in the factor analysis, and which did not combine with any cluster in the cluster analysis (ambivalence and other's view). This replication underscores the reliability of the factor analysis results, particularly in light of the intended use for data reduction purposes.

alarm watch preprogrammed to produce five independently determined alarms in the course of a day. To produce the alarm settings, the sampled period of 9 A.M. to 11 P.M. was divided into five equal intervals of 2 hours, 48 minutes and within each interval one time was randomly selected and programmed into each watch by the experimenters. Thus, each subject's watch alarms went off at different times and those times were distributed over the course of the entire day. The participants' programs were switched to new random times blocked in the same manner at the half-way point of the study (on the 7th and 8th days).

Experience sampling record sheets. Each time when an alarm went off during the day, subjects filled out an experience sampling record sheet reporting their activities and feelings. On each sheet subjects were asked to report the date and time of the report, the activity they were engaged in, and the number of people participating in the activity. They rated their emotional state on 13 bipolar 7-point scales (pessimistic-optimistic, hungry-full, sad-happy, irritable-cheerful, weak-strong, hostile-friendly, dissatisfied-satisfied, passive-active, distant-intimate, detached-involved, bored-excited, stressed-relaxed, and drowsy-alert) with higher numbers reflecting the more positive emotions. The emotion scales were adapted from other experience sampling studies (after Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Norem, 1987).

Subjects were instructed to fill out the event record sheet as soon as possible after the alarm rang. If they were unable to report immediately, they were asked to remember their activity and feelings at the time of the alarm and report on them as soon as possible, including the time elapsed in the delay. Each event report was designed to take less than 2 minutes to complete.

Factor analyses were performed on the emotion ratings from the event reports in order to obtain summary factors for use in subsequent analyses. The mean for each subject on each of the 13 emotion scales was calculated over all of the events sampled and principal axis factorization was used to extract factors. Consistent with previous work on the structure of emotional experience, we found two major factors accounting for 46.0% and 11.3% of the common variance. Following varimax rotation, the two factors were interpreted as affective valence (positive or negative) and level of involvement. Emotions loading on affective valence were pessimism-optimism, sad-happy, irritable-cheerful, hostile-friendly, dissatisfied-satisfied, and stressed-relaxed. Emotions loading on the involvement factor were passive-active, distant-intimate, detached-involved, and bored-excited. Hungry-full, weak-strong, and drowsy-alert did not load on either factor. Given the empirical and theoretical support in the literature for this pattern (Russell, 1980; Watson & Tellegen, 1985), emotion indices (involvement and positive affect) were created by averaging the ratings on the saliently loading dimensions from each factor for each event

report. In the present data, these indices averaged across the event sampling were correlated, $r(52) = .46, p < .01$, presumably reflecting the evaluative connotations of the particular involvement emotions used here.

Diary reports. At the end of each day subjects completed a diary report in which they looked back over the events of the day and rated how relevant each of the “beeper events” was to each of the seven consensual life task categories (using a 3-point scale, from irrelevant to very relevant). For example, a subject beeped while in class with a friend might note that this was very relevant to her “getting good grades” task, somewhat relevant to her “making friends” task, but not at all relevant to the other five task categories. Thus, the subjects decided for themselves which tasks, if any, were involved in their daily life events. If subjects were unable to complete the diary report form at the end of the day, they were asked to complete it first thing the following morning.

Participation in the experience-sampling and daily-diary phase of the study was reasonably good. Subjects completed an average of 72% of the 75 experience sampling record sheets and handed in an average of 11.6 of the 15 daily diary reports. Missing experience sampling records were caused by several different factors. First, subjects had been instructed that they could remove their watches during occasions when they did not want to be interrupted (e.g., napping, showers, intimate moments). Although some of these times might have been of special interest (e.g., particularly threatening or central life events such as a sports match or a personal argument), we reasoned that it was better for overall participation to give subjects this amount of personal control and leeway in the procedure. Other situations in our subjects’ lives, although of no particular significance themselves, also produced missing records because they conflicted inherently with the procedures (e.g., long drives in a car; sleeping late in the morning). An unanticipated and frequent source of missing data in the experience sampling was mechanical failures of the alarm watches. Due to the use of standard commercial alarm watches it was possible for subjects to accidentally deactivate (but not reprogram) alarms scheduled for a day. These missing records were random over the course of a day and of the study. (When a subject’s data suggested this problem, we met with the subject to reactivate the lost alarm.) Finally, in some instances, subjects interrupted participation in this phase of the study for a few days. Several subjects went away for a weekend during the course of the study and failed to bring their materials with them, resulting in missing diary reports and experience sampling record sheets. A few subjects postponed participation in the experience sampling for several days because of the press of midterm deadlines and sorority responsibilities. However, all subjects were encouraged to take part in this phase of

the study, despite interruptions in participation, and we obtained an average of 54.3 experience sampling record sheets per subject (2,933 in total).²

Final questionnaire

The final questionnaire included, among other measures, assessments of life satisfaction in life domains corresponding to the seven life tasks, and a re-administration of the PSS measuring daily life stress in the preceding month. The 30-minute questionnaire was administered in a group setting just at the end of classes and before the final exam period. Satisfaction was rated on 9-point scales and included standard questions for all domains as well as questions tailored to each domain. For the present analyses, satisfaction scores were constructed for each of seven relevant domains by taking the mean of rated satisfaction/happiness and desire for change (reversed) in that domain. In four of the seven domains, an additional item, "performance meeting expectations," was available, and it was included in the average satisfaction scores for those domains. The average interitem correlation within each domain was .47, ranging from .34 to .66.

RESULTS

Life Task Relevance in Daily Life

Subjects' nightly diary reports of the relevance of each beeper event in the day to each of the seven consensual life tasks provided a way of assessing the match or fit of these different life tasks to the daily life experience of these women. In a majority of the sampled events (76%), at least one task was rated as highly relevant to the event. To examine the pattern of life task-daily event fit, we calculated the mean relevance rating for each task category over all of the events sampled

2. Subjects with low versus high rates of participation in this phase of the study were compared. Subjects did not differ on overall daily life stress in either the initial or final assessments nor on any of the appraisal indices for the grades or sorority life tasks. Low responders appraised the social life task of making friends as more difficult and had higher levels of outcome evaluation for it. During the experience-sampling phase, they rated the grades and goals tasks as significantly more relevant than did the high responders, but they did not differ on any of the other tasks. Thus, these subjects may have been more committed to the academic tasks than were the high responders, at least during this 2-week period. However, these differences should not affect the within-subject analyses reported here.

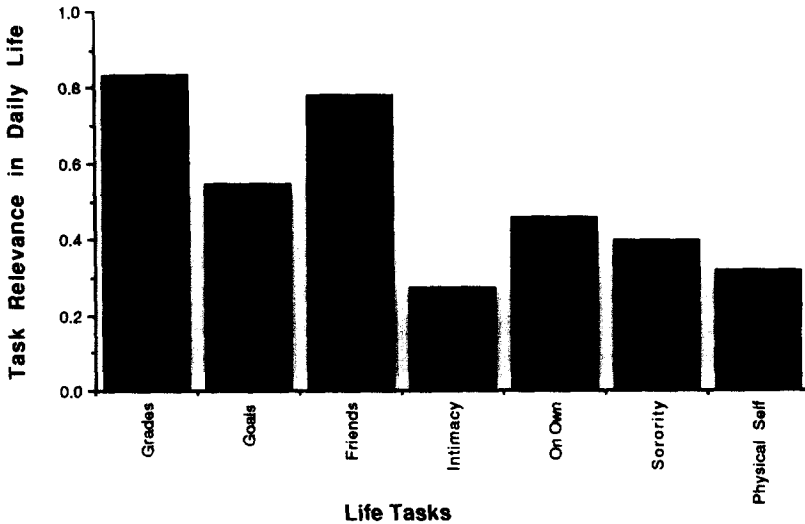


Figure 1
Task Relevance in Daily Life for the Seven Life Tasks

for each subject. The mean relevance could range from zero (the task was seen as irrelevant in every event sampled) to 2 (the task was highly relevant to every event sampled). The mean relevance rating for each consensual task was significantly greater than zero, indicating that across subjects, each task was seen as relevant in these sampled events, $t_s(53)$ ranged from 25.33 to 8.04, all $p_s < .001$. Also, as shown in Figure 1, there were differences in relevance among the seven tasks, overall $F(6, 318) = 43.45$, $p < .001$, with grades and friends being the most relevant tasks on a daily basis. (Bonferroni post-hoc comparison tests showed that the relevance of both grades and friends was higher than that of any of the other tasks, although these two tasks did not differ from each other in mean relevance.)

Although we expected, as shown above, that subjects would basically agree on the daily life relevance of the consensual life tasks, there should also be individual differences that follow from the appraised importance of each task for each subject. In other words, there should be a positive relationship between the importance of a task and the perceived relevance of that task in daily life. The abstract dimension of life task importance should be given concrete meaning by the way in which a person interprets commonplace events. One way to test

this prediction is to examine the within-subject correlations between the appraised importance of tasks and the relevance of those tasks in daily life. According to our view, if, for example, an individual places more importance in general on the task of making friends than on the task of finding intimacy, then she would also be more likely to see her day-to-day life events as relevant to the friends task rather than to the intimacy task.

As a test of this within-subjects prediction about the importance-relevance relationship, for each subject we calculated the correlation between her ratings of the importance of the seven consensual life tasks (provided in the first questionnaire) and her ratings of the average relevance of each task to the daily life events sampled in the experience sampling (from the nightly diary ratings). The mean of these within-subject correlations was then tested against a mean of zero, revealing the predicted positive relationship between an individual's ratings of the importance of each life task and her ratings of the daily life relevance of the tasks, $r = .31$, $t(53) = 6.38$, $p < .001$.³

Emotions Experienced in Task-Relevant Events

Next, as a test of the impact of life tasks on emotional experience in daily life, we compared subjects' emotional involvement and positive affect in events that they had rated as highly relevant to their life tasks, versus events that were less task-relevant. Specifically, using their nightly diary ratings of the relevance of each beeper event to each of the seven life tasks, we obtained for each subject the mean on the involvement index for events that they had rated as highly relevant to at least one life task, and compared those means to the subject's mean level of involvement in events that they rated as only moderately relevant or irrelevant to all of the seven life tasks. This process was repeated for the mean ratings of positive affect in the highly task-relevant versus less relevant events. As predicted, the women were more emotionally involved in events that they perceived as highly task-relevant than in the less relevant events, mean involvement: highly relevant = 4.52, $SD = .42$; less relevant = 4.03, $SD = .50$; $t(52) = 6.76$, $p < .001$.

3. These within-subject correlations were normally distributed; therefore, no data transformations were performed. The same holds true for all subsequent within-subject analyses.

In contrast, their experiences of positive affect in highly relevant versus less relevant daily life events were not reliably different, mean positive affect: highly relevant = 4.70, $SD = .41$; less relevant = 4.56, $SD = .56$; $t(52) = 1.96$, $p < .10$.

Next, in order to see how subjects felt when working on these different tasks, we calculated mean emotion index scores for each person for each task. The diary ratings of task relevance enabled the aggregation of the daily life events into individualized sets of task-relevant events. Weighted average emotion index scores for positive affect and involvement were obtained for each task by weighting the emotion ratings for a particular event by 2 if that event was rated as highly relevant to that task and by 1 if it was only moderately relevant to that task. Events rated as irrelevant to a task were excluded from the score for that task for that person.⁴ Thus, if two subjects happened to be beeped while in the same sorority meeting, but one rated that event as highly relevant to the task of making friends and the other as irrelevant to that task, the sorority event would only enter into the calculations of the emotion indices for the friends task for the former, and not for the latter, subject.

Figure 2 shows these weighted mean emotion indices averaged across the sample for each of the tasks as revealed in relevant daily events. As suggested by a life task model, there were differences in both positive affect and in emotional involvement for the different consensual tasks, $F(6, 282) = 24.88$, $p < .01$ for the positive affect index; $F(6, 282) = 22.56$, $p < .01$ for the involvement index. Subjects experienced the least positive affect and involvement in events they saw as relevant to the grades task, and the most positive affect and involvement in the events they saw as relevant to the friends and intimacy tasks. (Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed significantly less positive affect and involvement for the grades task as compared with any of the other six tasks, whereas the intimacy task evoked more involvement and happiness than in the grades, goals, on own, and physical maintenance tasks.)

4. Because each beeper event was rated for relevance to each of the seven tasks, a single event could contribute to the average emotion index for more than one task. Therefore, the positive affect indices for the seven tasks are somewhat correlated with each other, as are the involvement indices. In general, about 25% of the events contributing to an index for one task also contribute to the index for another task. This correlation does not affect any analyses within a task, although it does tend to work against between-task differences.

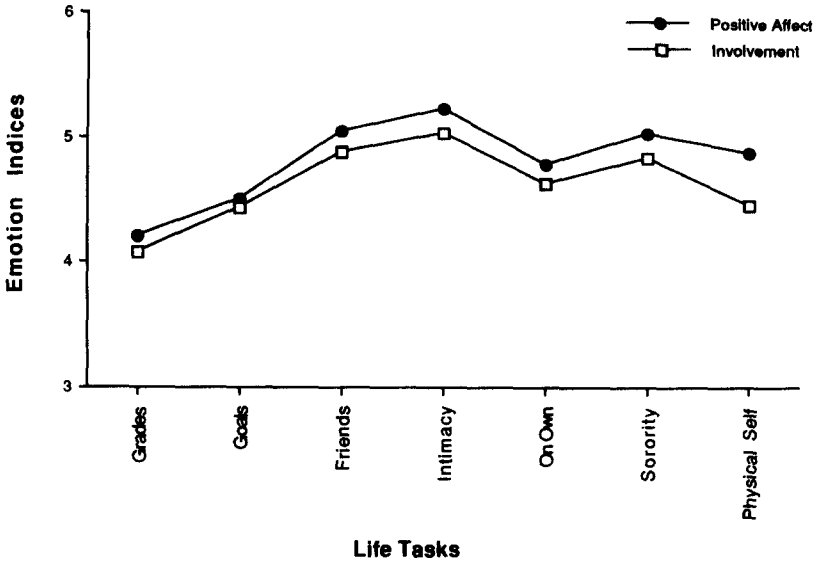


Figure 2
Emotion Profiles for the Seven Life Tasks

Task Appraisals and Daily Life Emotions

The central prediction of this article is that life task appraisals should be associated with specific patterns of emotional experience in events seen as relevant to those tasks. That is, individuals should feel relatively more positive affect and emotional involvement in the life tasks that they personally appraised as highly rewarding, or as relatively low in difficulty or in outcome evaluation pressure. If, for example, an individual appraised the task of intimacy as more rewarding than the task of grades, then she should feel generally more emotionally involved and happier in intimacy-relevant events than in grades-relevant events. Such a phrasing of the hypothesis constitutes a within-subject prediction about appraisal-emotion relationships. In other words, for each person, the relative ranking of her tasks on the appraisal factor indices of difficulty, rewardingness, and outcome evaluation should be associated with the relative rankings of enjoyment and involvement experienced in task-relevant events. Also, this within-subject analysis allows for a test of these task-appraisal-task-emotion relationships unconfounded by the influence of other personality factors like positive self-regard that influence daily life emotions.

Table 1
Relationship of Task Appraisal to Daily Life Emotion
in Task-Relevant Events

Appraisal factor index	Emotion factor index	
	Involvement	Positive affect
Difficulty	-.27 ^a	-.33 ^b
Rewardingness	.21 ^c	.13 ^d
Outcome evaluation	-.19 ^e	-.22 ^f

Note. The data entries represent the average within-subject correlation of a task appraisal index with an emotion index in task-relevant events.

a. $t(53) = -5.86, p < .001$.

b. $t(53) = -6.57, p < .001$.

c. $t(53) = 3.79, p < .001$.

d. $t(53) = 2.25, p < .05$.

e. $t(53) = -3.56, p < .001$.

f. $t(53) = -3.46, p < .01$.

Therefore, in order to test this prediction, we calculated the within-subject correlation between each of the three appraisal indices and the two emotion indices over the seven life tasks, obtaining six correlation coefficients per subject. As a test of this within-subject appraisal to emotions relationship, the means of the coefficients (averaging over subjects) were tested against a mean of zero separately for the six Appraisal Factor \times Emotion Index relationships. As shown in Table 1, all six relationships were significantly different from zero in t test comparisons. Moreover, consistent with our interpretation of the difficulty and outcome evaluation factors as representing aspects of anxiety about life tasks, these appraisals related negatively to both involvement and positive affect, whereas the rewardingness of the task was associated with increased emotional involvement and happiness in task-relevant daily life events.

In order to assess the relative contribution of each of these three appraisal factors to the prediction of day-to-day positive affect and involvement, we performed two one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). For both of these analyses, the rewardingness index was reversed so that the correlations would all be in the same direction and only the correlation magnitude would affect the results. The first analysis compared the magnitude of the correlations of each factor with positive affect,

and the results were significant, $F(2, 106) = 3.39, p < .05$. Post-hoc tests showed that difficulty was more strongly related to positive affect than was rewardingness. (A supplementary analysis, using a test of differences between related correlations, provided the same result.) The second analysis compared the correlations of the same appraisal factors with involvement, but the results were not significant, $F < 1$. Thus all three factors were associated with involvement to a similar degree.

From Life Tasks to Life Satisfaction and Life Stress

An additional prediction of this article is that there should be a relationship between life tasks and life satisfaction. In the present study there are two aspects of life tasks, appraisals and emotional experience, that should relate to life satisfaction. First, subjects should feel more satisfied with their lives in the domains that correspond to tasks in which they experienced positive affect and a high level of involvement. Second, subjects' prior beliefs about their life tasks may influence their satisfaction above and beyond their daily experience. Therefore, appraisals of their tasks as being difficult or unrewarding or as having evaluation pressure should decrease life satisfaction.

In order to test these relationships, analyses that parallel the within-subject correlations between appraisal and emotions reported above were performed on ratings of satisfaction. These analyses resulted in five correlations per subject—three relating the appraisal factor indices to ratings of life satisfaction in appropriate domains, and two relating the two emotion indices to the satisfaction ratings (e.g., positive affect in events relevant to the intimacy task paired with self-reported satisfaction with romantic life). (The satisfaction measures were based upon domain-specific ratings provided at the end of the semester, as described earlier.)

The within-subject test of the relationship of daily life emotions to life satisfaction in relevant domains revealed a significant association between positive affect and satisfaction, average within-subject correlation, $r = .19, t(52) = 2.82, p < .01$. There was also a positive relationship between involvement and satisfaction, average within-subject correlation, $r = .15, t(52) = 2.27, p < .05$. For the appraisals, there was a significant positive relationship between rewardingness and satisfaction, average within-subject correlation, $r = .25, t(54) =$

4.55, $p < .001$, and a significant negative relationship between difficulty and satisfaction, average within-subject correlation, $r = -.20$, $t(54) = -3.86$, $p < .001$. However, there was no relationship between the outcome evaluation appraisal index and satisfaction.

In order to test for the independent contributions of these two sets of variables to rated satisfaction, within-subject partial correlations were obtained. The relationship between positive affect and satisfaction remained positive, but was no longer significant, after the contribution of the two appraisal indices was removed, average within-subject partial correlation, $r = .14$, $t(52) = 1.79$, $p < .10$. There was no remaining relationship of involvement to satisfaction after the contribution of the appraisal indices was removed. The relationship of the rewardingness appraisal index to satisfaction remained significant after the contribution of the two emotion indices was removed, average within-subject partial correlation, $r = .22$, $t(52) = 3.23$, $p < .01$, whereas the relationship of difficulty to satisfaction did not.

Emotional experience in these daily life events was also related to self-reports of life stress, as measured on the PSS. Positive affect in daily life events (averaged over all of the sampled events) was negatively related to perceived life stress at the end of the semester, even when initial levels of stress were controlled in the analysis, partial $r(49) = -.29$, $p < .05$. (The correlation between PSS scores in the first and last questionnaire was $r[49] = .50$, $p < .001$.) In contrast, emotional involvement in daily life events was not significantly related to perceived stress later in the semester, partial $r(46) = .05$, *ns*.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that an understanding of daily life experience can be informed by close attention to the life tasks that individuals see themselves as pursuing in their day-to-day events. As life-span analyses would suggest (e.g., Elder, 1975; Higgins & Parsons, 1983), these sorority women shared a set of consensual life tasks that they saw as relevant to their daily lives. Nevertheless, as individuals they each ascribed special importance to some of these consensual tasks and attached less importance to other ones. Their personal appraisals of task importance were reflected in the ordering for each of them of these tasks in relevance in daily life. That is, for each subject, her general commitment to a life task was specifically reflected on a daily basis in

her interpretation of events as opportunities for working on that task. Thus, individuals' own construals of life tasks surfaced within the background of consensus in the sorority group about what tasks to work on and how and when such tasks typically arose in daily life.

The life task analysis also proved useful as a way of uncovering regularities in daily life emotions. Specifically, these women experienced more emotional involvement in events that they perceived as highly relevant to at least one of their life tasks than they did in less relevant events, and their day-to-day experience of positive affect and emotional involvement in these tasks reflected for each person the ordering of the tasks on appraisal factors of difficulty, rewardingness, and outcome evaluation. Especially noteworthy is the relatively stronger relationship of task difficulty and positive affect as compared with task rewardingness and positive affect—these women “lost” more by working on hard tasks than they “gained” by engaging in rewarding tasks. Moreover, both those appraisals and their specific emotional experiences of these tasks on a daily basis were associated with individuals' assessments of life satisfaction in domains that corresponded to the seven consensual life tasks.

Creating Daily Life Experience

A central feature of these data is that they reveal the creativity of individuals in finding daily life events to be relevant to their important life tasks, even in the relatively “regulated” life environments of college students. Individuals can create their life environments both behaviorally, in the choices they make of situations and activities to pursue (e.g., Snyder, 1981; Zirkel & Cantor, 1989), and cognitively, in their interpretations of those events. The present data on life task relevance address this latter aspect of creative interpretation, or “constructive alternativism,” as Kelly coined the term (1955). The women in this sample brought their personally important life tasks to bear more frequently in daily life than their less important tasks, and they interpreted everyday occurrences in ways that reflected their personal task commitments. For example, those who were particularly involved in the intimacy life task were significantly more likely to see ostensibly nonsocial events, such as a trip to the library, as occasions for interpersonal intimacy, than were their less involved peers (Cantor, 1990a). These cognitive interpretations of daily life events were also linked to the emotional

experience of the events. As individuals selectively bring to bear their preferred life tasks in their daily lives, they indeed create and constrain the nature of that life experience (Cantor, 1990b; Klinger, 1989).

Personalizing Commonplace Life Events

The association of personal importance of a life task with task relevance in specific events extends the literature on daily life experience in several respects. In prior work, McAdams and Constantian (1983) and others have shown how individuals' motive dispositions influence the content of their daily life thoughts in motive-consistent ways. In the present study, the general importance of a life task to an individual influenced its likelihood of being brought to bear in specific daily life events, such as "sitting in a sorority meeting" or "studying for an exam." Although we have often assumed that important personal goals are broadly influential, there are relatively few demonstrations of this influence that implicate commonplace life events. Moreover, the influence of personal task commitment is actually somewhat surprising here in light of the highly structured environment in which these women lived. As Cantor and Fleeson (1991) have shown, there was a clear consensus among these women as to what tasks were appropriate in particular events (e.g., studying was a time to work on the grades and future goals tasks). In fact, there were even clear norms about when to work on each of these consensual life tasks (e.g., the grades task was most relevant during the midweek days and the friends task on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays). Nonetheless, the relative importance of each life task for each person was also a significant factor in her daily life pursuits, adding a personal influence to the interpretation of commonplace life events.

Life Tasks in Experience Sampling and in Nightly Diaries

In our view, daily life events take on personal meaning in light of the tasks that individuals are pursuing, which is why we predicted that daily life emotions would follow from life task relevance and appraisals. In addition, consensual life tasks, such as the tasks of intimacy, grades, or physical maintenance shared by these sorority women, become personalized for each person by their particular ways of pursuing the tasks

in their daily lives. Therefore, the objective of this approach is to use experience-sampling and diary methods in order to capture this interaction between life tasks and daily life events, i.e., to see the process by which each becomes personally meaningful in association with the other.

A critical element in the present study was the reliance on the subjects' own assessments of the relevance of their daily life events to their life tasks, obtained independently of their reports of emotions. The nightly diary reports provided a means of assessing the relative relevance of each task for each person in each event, without encumbering the experience sampling reports. The diary ratings allowed the subjects to acknowledge the relevance of multiple tasks to "single" events, while also comparing those tasks in degree of relevance. These individualized relevance ratings also provided the basis for an aggregation and a weighting scheme in which each person's experience of a consensual task was evaluated in events she perceived as relevant to that task, with extra weight accorded to her experiences in highly task-relevant events. Aggregating the events this way enabled us both to be idiographically faithful and still to make comparisons as to the relevance and emotion profiles of these shared tasks. Together, the relatively "top of the head" emotion reports gathered in the experience sampling, combined with the slightly more distanced reflections in the nightly diary, worked well to provide a portrait of these women at work on their tasks in daily life (Hormuth, 1986).

The Process of Pursuing Life Tasks

Another critical feature in the present analysis has been the focus on each person's comparative experience of her different tasks, i.e., the within-subject approach. Whereas it would certainly be profitable to compare across individuals, looking, for example, at differences in their appraisals of and emotions in common life tasks, the within-subject approach provides another useful part of the personality puzzle. It reveals the common principles that underlie the connection between task appraisals and daily life emotions, as they are played out repeatedly in the lives of individuals. For example, although the women in this sample differed in their personal rank orderings of task difficulty, they each had difficult tasks and easy tasks, and they experienced relatively more positive affect in events relevant to their easy tasks—whichever

those happened to be. In the persistent trade-off between frustration and boredom in task pursuit, these women seemed to share a greater distaste for frustration than for boredom. This principle of task pursuit emerged as a general one for this sample in the within-subject analysis, although subjects' domains of frustration and of boredom varied.

This principle of task pursuit is also interesting as a complement to other principles obtained in the experience sampling and task motivation literature. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1985) demonstrated the general appeal of challenging tasks that allow for mastery—i.e., people often feel best when working on hard tasks over which they have personal control. Palsy and Little (1983) found a positive relationship between the “short-term” manageability of personal projects and individuals' life satisfaction. Fleeson (1990) showed how in some contexts, feelings of personal control over one's life tasks could ameliorate the negative impact on daily life stress associated with their pursuit. These studies seem to point to the importance of perceived control as an intervening factor in individuals' taste for pursuit of highly challenging or difficult tasks.

Unfortunately, however, people may not feel sure of their personal control on a day-to-day basis over particular life tasks (e.g., how much control can one exert when “making friends”?). Or, those feelings of control may fluctuate substantially from day to day or week to week for life tasks that persist over a substantial period. Therefore, it may be more telling in most life task contexts to consider individuals' current tolerance for frustration (e.g., working on tasks that are generally more difficult than manageable) relative to their distaste for boredom (e.g., working on tasks that present few challenges or surprises). In the present sample, intolerance for frustration may have provided a more powerful motivation than the distaste of boredom because of the relative magnitude of the negative contribution of task difficulty to positive affect on a daily basis—our sample did, indeed, have something to lose in their experience of day-to-day events, by persisting too vigorously on personally difficult tasks.

Person-Environment Congruence and Life Task Pursuits

In the present approach, we assume that individuals can structure their life experience in part by the nature of the tasks they bring to bear in

their day-to-day routines. This generative or creative role for individuals (Cantor, 1990b) is presumed to occur even in fairly organized or standardized life environments, such as in the college sorority studied here. As Snyder (1981) and others have noted, individuals can go some distance toward defining their own life experience by finding environments to fit their preferences and goals. Moreover, to the extent that individuals find ways to work, for example, on their most important or most rewarding tasks in their day-to-day life, then we can surmise from the present data that they may experience increased emotional involvement, positive affect, and satisfaction in daily life.

Yet, do we all take full advantage of the opportunities to manage our task environments in this way—to achieve congruence between our tasks and our daily lives (Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1986)? Individuals differ in the tendency to structure their life environment to perform their tasks. Little (1989), for example, referred to two very different styles of pursuit of personal projects: the “Assertive Reliables pushing their projects through to completion and the Self-Consciously Timorous muddling along with, but not quite through, their projects” (p. 24). There are also constraints in different life environments that sometimes make it difficult to carry out a task in that setting (e.g., Price & Bouffard, 1974). Certainly one definition of powerlessness might be confrontation with an environment that blocks a person from addressing his or her pressing life tasks. Moreover, for most people there are times in life when it seems easier or more difficult, for a variety of reasons, to bring daily life in line with personal life tasks. Nonetheless, in our view there is a potential for active negotiation between persons and their life environments, and one way to approach this negotiation is to shape life tasks that are both personally gratifying and practically feasible in day-to-day life. This particular aspect of person-environment interaction, in turn, deserves continuing attention in the study of personality and daily life.

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