

**Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi**

## **PhD THESIS SUMMARY**

**The impact of personality and couple factors in defining,  
pursuing and attaining goals**

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**PhD thesis summary**

## **I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Chapter 1. Individual and common goals – conceptual clarification**

The first chapter describes, from the theoretical point of view, the personal goal concept and differentiates it from the common goals, specific to romantic relationships. Gradually, are highlighted the most common prospects in the specialty literature, that are used both in theory and in practice. More detailed, are highlighted a few classic psychological models that have been used over the time as benchmarks for interpreting people's behaviors and personal decisions or choices. These models are: self-determination model of the self, model of satisfying the basic psychological needs, intrinsic motivation vs. extrinsic motivation, model of action phases, model of approach-avoidance goals, model of fantasies setting and fulfillment.

From the evolutionary perspective which seems to give meaning to gender differences most often recorded over time, subchapters of this first theme are following the depiction of several levels of concept analysis: a) the degree of compliance of personal choices with the self (Sheldon, Elliot, 1999) made for the future that aims to explain the degree of effort for goals achievement and the reasons for its maintenance, abandonment or postponement, b) the level of concept abstraction that differentiates between daily tasks, personal struggle, personal projects, personal plans, personal goals on short term and personal goals on long term ((Heckhausen, Heckhausen, 2008, Emmons, McAdams, 1991), c) an economic perspective, by which personal goals can explain a wide variety of human behaviors, can predict human behavior and can influence values, emotional states, effectiveness, behaviors efficiency (Moskowitz, Grant, 2009), d) at a cognitive level, Fishbach & Ferguson (2007), takes a practical definition to refer to an understanding perspective of personal goals of independence type and specific to social cognitive psychology. More specifically, they try to understand what are the activated aims, the features of these operations and how exactly personal goals interact. Stressing the mental representation side of goals that has an impact on the assessment processes, affective processes and behaviors, the authors are addressing to unconscious side that can enable and influence a person, e) the authors refer to the linguistic and historical perspective to clarify the lack of consensus at the definitional level (Elliot, Fryer, 2008). At etymological level, the word goals has the meaning of destination, limit / border or specific final. Also, at a historical level, the concept of goal brings the idea to give meaning to life and actions of a person. Finally, the authors suggests to take under consideration five characteristics to define personal goal: a) is focused on one object (e.g. entity, experience, characteristic, etc.), b) is used to guide or direct behavior, c) is directed to the future, d) is internal represented and e) can be represented on an approach-avoidance continuum.

In theory, specialty literature most often take into account the congruence level between personal goals of a couple partners, concluding that the pursuit of goals in the couple affects the quality of relationship, the level of closeness and intimacy felt by them. (Gere, 2012). What is increasingly recognized is the fact that the goals are pursued in social contexts. People are pursuing their goals being in the company of others, and those who are involved in couple relationship are pursuing their goals within the existing relationship. Close relationships, in the pursuing of the goals, affects many aspects (Fitzsimons, Finkel, 2010) since there are personal goals that need to be fulfilled, and the degree of congruence or conflict between those can affect the quality of the relationship and the fulfillment of those goals. Studies show that the presence of others influences if we start or not the pursuit of an goal, meaning that they can be stimulated or inhibited in the presence of other persons, thus, influencing the rate at which they are carried out. Moreover, the presence of some persons can quickly activate and fulfill an goal without much conscience of the person, which leads toward unconscious fulfillment of the same goal. (Fitzsimons, Bargh, 2003). At the same time, the presence of others can influence the effectiveness with which goals are pursued, thus, influencing the process

of its fulfillment. (Finkel, 2006). However, the persons around us are affecting our goals pursuit, suggesting that if persons with whom we are involved in very close relationships consider that an goal is not attainable, then their assessment will influence the assessment of their partners (Shah, 2003).

Regarding the achievement of couple goals, the specialty literature is now highlighting three dominant perspectives: the gender differences perspective and gender roles, investing effort, time and commitment in achieving personal, individual goals and common directions. As regarding gender differences, they are intensely analyzed in studies regarding stereotypes, errors due to gender roles and even a profile that can ensure performance and success for people (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

## **Chapter 2. Personality and couple factors involved in the achievement of common goals**

In the second chapter the focus is on the theoretical description of the motivational persistence (Constantin, Holman, & Hojbotă, 2011), over time evolution regarding its development and to what extend can be considered a relatively stable factor of personality. In other words, it aims the description of malleable capacity of motivational persistence, meaning that generally the aspects and mechanism of conative system are sensitive to contextual factors and especially to the way the goals are formed and described. At the same time, the meaning of relatively stable is specific to personalities features considered to be important, the motivational persistence being one of those categories that covers a wide range of human behaviors. Moreover, as it can be seen, the concept can explain constant behavior patterns. However, it can be noticed that this personality characteristic was not enough developed in relation to commitment and abandonment of goals on long term and in relation to favorable or unfavorable factors for their achievement. In agreement with the theory of the self-actualization which is based on explanations of organismic type, the motivational persistence is based on the principles of satisfying personal needs and is associated with the need for positive assessment, with the capacity to intervene in complex cognitive processes like evaluating and solving problems. Also, motivational persistence is involved as a personal feature in central activity of thinking – understanding and seeking for as many possible solutions. Although these suggestions are necessary, the risk of a holistic approach is the unrealistic expansion of an explanatory model and construction of a general scheme only with the purpose of a benchmark, but not to explain general behavior patterns or practical theoretical models.

The second purpose of this chapter is to integrate updated data on the social and psychological status of romantic relationships. The overtime changes are similar to those described internationally (Barr & Simons, 2014), and is, therefore, more important to think in psychological aspects such as commitment, trust, family resilience or interpersonal relationships than married or unmarried. General data shows that people prefer to live together, but through cohabitation rather than marriage, which is why the first marriage age has increased by 5 years in the last 20 years. However, even this form of couple relationship doesn't advantage them, the individual wellbeing is not different from that of marriage, instead, relationship quality is defective. In other words, social status doesn't seem to be a determining factor for the wellbeing rather the relationship quality can lead to psychological states of emotional nature, affective and behavioral with risk (e.g. tension, depression, anxiety). Regarding intimate, romantic relationships, the quality of interaction between them seems to be a determining factor that can direct wellbeing valence, but also the impact and intensity of some personal factors such as motivational persistence.

With the general theoretical framework described in this chapter, next are depicted an attempt to differentiate between psychological concepts like personal strategies for emotion regulation such as family resilience, coping and self-efficacy. The concepts are described taking into account the specificities of each one and also if they are focused on an individual level, dyadic or directed to type of relationship / interaction between partners. More particular studies from the field show that individual wellbeing and personal strength of emotional and behavioral type depend on the frame of reference to which a person relates, and to what extent identifies with certain roles or features.

### **Chapter 3. Subjective wellbeing – changes recorded over time**

The last chapter of the paper aims to define and differentiate some concepts used in specialty literature as being similar. Although the final purpose of such a paper could be improving quality of life, the thesis is from the practical point of view more focused on harmonization of individual goals and formulation of common, dyadic goals. As can be seen in the following, the quality of life is a very large conceptual umbrella which can be defined with a positive-negative continuum. In the other words, the quality of life can take form, at operational level, as well as wellbeing and by assessing the absence of some pathological symptoms. However, at psychological level the wellbeing concept is useful when indicators that values interaction between people or resources used to deal with complex situations are taken into account. What these concepts have in common is their placement for a continuum of control. Therefore, controlling some states or indicators from a person satisfies the need for autonomy, competence and interaction. Instead, the wellbeing refers only to subjective indicators, whereas quality of life is also defined in the light of purpose indicators.

In conclusion, in determining wellbeing, attitudes, beliefs and personal characteristics can contribute to shaping a person and also to stability of relationships between two people. So, satisfying the needs or congruence of some personal and common values are elements that can direct a person's wellbeing.

## **II. PRACTICAL PART**

### **Chapter 1. Description and analysis of the basic psychometric qualities of the tools used in studies**

In the first chapter of the thesis the main purpose is to psychometrically verify the psychological tools used during the studies. The relevance of psychological tools and their use requires a review of psychometric qualities, especially for the new and multidimensional ones. Also, considering that most described studies are using analyses based on regressions, we decided that these analyses will include an analysis of normal distribution and verification of the lot to identify extreme values. The analysis results show acceptable specific indicators according to requirements of factor analysis, Cronbach alpha coefficient and normal distribution based on Shapiro-Wilk test and identification of the extreme scores. Generally, the scales used to demonstrate psychometric qualities fit to use in analysis carried out in studies. The verified tools are: a) Motivational persistence (Constantin, 2013), b) Emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer 2004), c) Self-efficacy (Baban, Schwarzer, Jerusalem, 1996), d) Wellbeing (Watson, Clark & Tellegen 1988), e) Self-goals concordance (Deci & Ryan 1985), f) Basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1991), g) Family resilience (Sixbey-Tucker 2005), h) Resilience (Smith & others, 2008).

### **Chapter 2. Establishing common goals – qualitative analysis and defining the couple common goal**

The present chapter aims to build a working definition for the common goals concept of the couple, and to identify the psychological dimensions relevant for the dynamic of pursuing them on long-term. Regarding research approach, we chose the dyadic interview method since there are only few individual directions in the specialty literature to define them.

The general theme of the study aims opinions, attitudes, identifying personal needs and expectations regarding common objects in a couple relationship. Since there are only general directions for defining common goals and general perspectives for defining them, we chose the qualitative method to investigate the main elements that could be considered when we think about how the partners of a romantic relationship define common action directions. The chosen qualitative method is group interview, as it allows the investigation of specific cases in the relational dynamics, and partners can stimulate each other to develop the theme. Other advantages are the possibility of producing data sets focused on the proposed theme, obtaining some of its details and also details of emotional nature

which cannot be obtained easily by quantitative research. Also, group interaction helps create some synergistic effects that lead to higher quality information compared with individual interviews.

For the interview were contacted by telephone 30 couples (N = 60), and have been invited to attend the face to face meeting. All participants agreed to take part in an interview for 30 minutes to a maximum of 40 minutes. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 57 years. All participants have completed some form of higher education and are living in Romania.

The final results are confirming previous extensive studies regarding relational dynamics. A couple is not just a simple structure, but one with a set of cognitive schemes that validates and legitimizes its structure (Walsh, 2011). General structure and beliefs structure are supporting and justifying their action and their personal choices. The way how a family develops its structure is the way how they establish running benchmarks. The categories covered in this study are: *defining the concept of common goal, power relationship between the partners, gender differences, and influences of external and personal factors in defining common goals, the priorities of the couple, advantages and disadvantages of this process.*

The final results also confirm that the goals, planning and behavior are closely related, thus, there is a clear determination that could lead to positive wellbeing or to a state with negative valences. As are confirmed by previous studies, (Parks-Stamm & Gollwitzer, 2009) planning and making a plan motivates a person to act more quickly compared with those who do not make such intentions. By making such plans, a person stipulates an anticipated situation relevant for the goal, but not an appropriate and directed toward the goal answer.

### **Chapter 3. The role of motivational persistence and dynamics of emotional life in long-term changes and at subjective wellbeing level**

In this chapter a high interest is accorded to understanding of negative emotional management both theoretically and empirically. The theoretical basis of the research starts at the idea that motivational persistence is a characteristic relatively stable in time of the motivational system and that the dynamic emotional process often occurs in effective management of personal daily experiences. This study aims to understand the dynamics of emotional process by identifying the role of motivational persistence and emotional management involved in personal changes. The specialty literature led us to the idea that motivational persistence could be involved in negative emotional experiences. The changes in the variables of motivational process (intensity, overwhelming, dysfunctional thinking, justification, control and management capability) and their relation with motivational persistence were analyzed. For analysis were used quantified data from a population of 239 people. The participants recorded their negative emotions in a personalized diary during over 40 weeks. The results show that motivational persistence has little effect on the dynamics of emotional life and that its influence could increase if participants are expressing a high level of control over negative emotions.

The researches in the field show that there is a major interest for human affective phenomena (Davidson, Scherer, Goldsmith, 2003), mainly due the role in explaining personal relationships, social interactions and interactions from work. However, little information is available about when and how the content of emotional process may cause changes in the perceptual level of wellbeing. Unfortunately, the results are more descriptive and to interpret them according to positive or negative valence of wellbeing is not possible.

### **Chapter 4. The goals achievement in couple – determining factors and psychological consequences**

In the present study, the focus is on investigating the role of personal factors in achieving common goals and if the conditions are favorable. The most common theories are rather referring to the impact of forming the implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1993), since the intentions very closely related to behavior of a person make it easier to control and has a positive impact on the



accessibility of mental representation, bringing the situational indicators in the foreground, thus, enhancing the control on assumed behaviors. Forming the intentions promotes goal achievement, because eliminates classic problem of the lack of a direct link between chosen goal and actions directed towards goal.

This study aims testing the relationships in the concordance model of the self when the goal of the couple are achieved, hence to what extent its most significant associations can be validated :

- Factors promoting the approach to achieve the goal (type of goal, efforts and progress made over time).
- Factors that ensure a strong connection in time between achievement of the goal and changes of wellbeing (e.g. family resilience, basic psychological needs).
- Personality factors (motivational persistence) involved in the individual wellbeing felt over time.
- Factors that influencing the progress of common goals in time.

The participants of the study are 129 couples (N = 258) married or cohabiting for at least 2 years. None of the participants have children. Of the total number of 258 participants, only 200 were included in the final analysis. Some cases were excluded due to fill errors: one of the partners has done the questionnaire for both of them, some questionnaires were left blank, questionnaires filled in with a single answer variant or those that seem to be randomly filled and the participants were remarried and have children.

The results confirm the findings of studies regarding the model of consistency with the self, meaning choosing a goal that is consistent with the personal interests and values creates psychological comfort and the person will experience positive emotional states (Deci & Ryan, 2008). However, there are some question about goals theme and long-term implications, since the proposed model is partially confirmed, the effort to achieve the goal is not relevant for the recorded changes in the wellbeing. If until now the assumptions of most studies support that the effort and commitment to an goal depends on the type of goal and to what extent it represents interests of the person (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001), the results indicate that in the process of fulfillment of the goals may interfere the age-specific deadlines and relational dynamics to determine the quality and wellbeing felt individually.

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