Personal Projects: A Useful Approach to the Study of Occupation

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A comprehensive and useful understanding of human occupation requires research methods that capture its individual dimensions while permitting analyses within and across groups. In this article we describe the construct of personal projects and the research method of personal projects analysis. Both have their origins in studies of personality and have been used successfully to link individual traits and context-based, goal-directed behavior to well-being and other variables. The appropriateness and relevance of this approach for studies of occupation and occupational therapy are considered.

Personal Projects Defined

Personal projects have been defined as “interrelated sequences of actions intended to achieve some personal goal” (Palys & Little, 1983, p. 1223). Because personal projects are highly individual, are ongoing, and provide a way of linking motives or needs to specific goal-directed behaviors, they provide an understanding of the manner in which people organize or structure their lives.

Personal projects can be concrete or abstract and can range from short-term practical endeavors such as “fixing the car” or “revising my will” to long-term endeavors with more far-reaching implications such as “improving relationships with my partner” or “getting a promotion.” The typical person is able to list around 15 personal projects at any one time that structure and organize their time and activities (Little, 1983). These “sets” of personal projects have been referred to as “personal project systems” (Palys & Little, 1983).

Origins in Personality Psychology

For the past two decades, the literature in occupation and occupational science has given scant attention to personality, despite its wide recognition as a factor in vocational choice (Holland, 1959), learning (Kossowska & Necka, 1994), motivation (Revelle, 1993), activity preference (Furnham, 1981), and well-being (Emmons & Diener, 1985). Meanwhile, in psychology, personality research has achieved some consensus on the structure and stability of personality as well as increased appreciation of its influence on everyday behavior (Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1996).

Recent reviews in contemporary personality psychology have suggested that a three-tiered structure characterizes the currently influential research (Little, 1996; McAdams, 1996; Wakefield, 1989) (see Table 1). Although the scope of each level is different, researchers share a more or less coherent set of assumptions, methodological tools, and
Table 1
Levels of Personality Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Research Focus</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Traits</td>
<td>General descriptors for everyday behavioral tendencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Goal-oriented behaviors and concerns (personal action construct units)</td>
<td>Goal-directed personal actions within an environmental context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Narrative accounts of behavior</td>
<td>Stories created and told by persons in order to interpret their lives</td>
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aesthetic preferences about what constitutes valuable or interesting research within this framework.

Traits are at the first or foundational level of personality research. Trait descriptions are common in everyday language as shorthand for providing general descriptions of people on the basis of their typical everyday behaviors. Personality psychologists largely agree that five major groups of traits account for the tendencies that influence human behavior (Digman, 1990). These are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness and are described as the five-factor model. 

Costa and McCrae (1989) suggested that after 30 years of age, individual traits are relatively fixed and stable. There is also evidence that they are genetically influenced (Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996). Knowing a person's personality traits provides insight into that person's preferences and tendencies to act in certain ways (Costa & McCrae, 1988). In occupational therapy, personnel often consider traits in planning interventions for clients. For example, a practitioner might identify a client's conscientious nature as an asset for learning new skills or adaptive techniques.

At the second level of personality research are specific behavioral tendencies reflected in daily activities. These behaviors are referred to as personal action construct (PAC) units. They include personal actions described as strivings, projects, task commitments, concerns, and undertakings (Little et al., 1992). The PAC unit approach to studying personality is viewed as more dynamic and more influenced by the environment than the trait unit approach (Little, 1996). Cantor (1990) has characterized the focus of this level of personality research as exploring the relationships between the havings and doings of human personality.

Personal projects are a type of PAC. Other related units of study include current concerns (Klinger, 1987), life tasks (Cantor, 1990), and personal strivings (Emmons, 1986). Studies using personal projects analysis (as well as those using other PACs) have amassed sufficient evidence of validity to gain recognition for personal projects as an important line of inquiry in personality research and action psychology (Cantor, 1990).

At the third level of personality research are the stories or personal narratives that persons create in order to provide an integrated and comprehensible account of the various forces that comprise their lives (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1996). These accounts also have been of interest to researchers in occupational science (Clark, 1993; Frank, 1996; Larson & Fanchang, 1996).

Influence of Murray and Kelly

The personal projects approach was developed by Little (1983) as a means for studying individual circumstances and factors influencing well-being. The development of this approach was influenced by the work of Kelly (1955) and Murray (1938, 1959). Kelly's theory of personal constructs held that behavior is influenced by each person's unique matrix of experiences and perceptions, which he described as a repertory grid. He believed that a person's anticipation of events and the experiences and perceptions that the person brought to any situation uniquely influenced his or her other resources available for coping. Thus, any person's resources for dealing with life events are governed by his or her personal characteristics as well as his or her actual and vicarious experiences. Kelly also believed that the person was the best source of information on the purpose, meaning, and significance of his or her own behavior.

Murray's (1938) theory of manifest needs held that behavior was influenced by serial events, a person's sequenced and related sets of actions. Murray believed that a person undertook these sets of actions to address their various needs. Thus, motivation to act is explained by one's desire to fulfill unmet needs. For example, a person with a strong nurturance need (a need to support, protect, and comfort others) might engage in more volunteer work or find ways to be more helpful to friends than are persons whose need in this area is weaker.

Thus, the personal projects approach draws on the work of Murray (1938) by identifying related sets of goal-directed tasks as uniquely expressing a person's needs. It applies the work of Kelly (1955) by using a grid to analyze personal projects in terms of specific dimensions of interest as reported directly by the person. In short, the concept of personal projects refines and extends the earlier notions of Kelly and Murray into a personalized method for describing and studying individual life pursuits.

Over the course of their lives, people undertake a
broad array of pursuits, many of which are of short duration and frequently repeated, such as tasks necessary for self-maintenance (e.g., the morning routine to prepare for the day). Others may be highly individualized and of longer duration, extending over weeks, months, or years (e.g., finding a job, caring for an aging parent). Regardless of their duration, both routine and episodic endeavors often possess dimensions of value and meaning that can only be revealed by directly asking persons to identify and evaluate them. Moreover, because individual lives tend to be characterized by constellations of activities and meanings, one cannot hope to gain insight and understanding without recognizing that individual pursuits are embedded within complex systems of activity. This complexity requires analytical approaches that attend to both individual goal-directed units (or projects) as well as the unique combination of projects that organize a person’s behavior. Personal projects analysis was developed with these dimensions of individual occupation in mind.

Personal Projects Analysis

Personal projects analysis is composed of several interrelated modules that elicit data about personal project systems, the unique array of goal-directed pursuits that reflect a person’s concerns at any point in his or her life. Because people devote varying amounts of time and attention to their projects and because the relative proportion of obligatory (required) versus discretionary (chosen) projects may vary, no assumptions are made about the amount of time people spend pursuing their identified projects. Instead of accounting for the time spent on various activities, project systems analysis focuses on the characteristics and interrelationships of the projects constituting a person’s individual project system at a particular point in time. A description of three modules of personal projects analysis follows. More detailed and comprehensive explanations are reported elsewhere (Little, 1983, 1989; Palys & Little, 1983).

Module I: Eliciting Project Lists

In the first module, persons are asked to list personal projects in which they are currently engaged. This is called the elicitation process. Little (1983, 1989) noted that although different persons may list projects in identical categories, the content and syntax of those projects can differ markedly, thus highlighting individual differences. For example, all three of the following projects are in the academic domain for college students: “study Thursday’s chemistry notes,” “keep up in my courses,” and “develop intellectually.” The first project is highly specific and concrete; the last is more abstract and open-ended. Additionally, the frequency of projects of various types (e.g., a high number of individual vs. social pursuits) may provide insights into a person’s primary motivations.

Module II: Rating Matrix

In the second module, or rating matrix, persons are asked to select from the projects elicited during the first module 10 in which they have the highest likelihood of engaging during the weeks immediately after their completion of personal projects information. They are then asked to rate their identified projects according to various dimensions or characteristics, such as importance, control, success, enjoyment, and time adequacy. There are 17 core dimensions (see Table 2); however, investigators may use other dimensions in the project rating matrix to address particular research interests. An 11-point scale is used for these ratings, ranging from low (0) to high (10).

The rating of project dimensions allows comparisons of one person’s ratings with those of others. When persons use the same rating scale and dimensions to describe their projects, nomothetic or group analyses can be done. Of interest are not the individual projects per se, but the overall “project system” and the profile generated by his or her ratings across the various dimensions. Thus, the extent to which person A finds her projects important and challenging can be compared with the extent to which person B finds his projects (as a whole) important and challenging. For each person, the rating of projects on specific dimensions can be quite revealing and can potentially serve as a basis for identifying values, habits, and motivating factors in activity choice. This has particular relevance for occupational therapy as a method for not only identifying primary goal-directed activities of importance to clients and thus for setting priorities for intervention, but also identifying a client’s sense of efficacy and perceived barriers to completing valued projects. In effect, the rating matrix section of personal projects analysis is a form of activity analysis that enables a therapist to analyze a system of projects instead of focusing on analyzing a single task from a biomechanical or psychosocial perspective. The analysis provides a more realistic perspective by including the person’s values and perceptions of his or her current life activities in context.

Module III: Cross-Impact Matrix

After completing the first two core modules, other modules are optional. For example, one can complete a pairwise analysis among the 10 projects rated within a person’s identified project set. This “cross-impact analysis” requires the person to consider the impact of each project on each other project. The purpose of the analysis is to determine whether any given project has a positive, negative, or neutral impact on each of the other projects in the individual’s personal project system. Persons rate the impact of one project on another using a five-point scale ranging from very negative (−2) through neutral (0).
Table 2
Definitions of the Core Dimensions Used in Personal Projects Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Dimension</th>
<th>Description Given for Rating Listed Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary dimensions defining the factor labeled meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance</td>
<td>How important each project is to you at the present time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoyment</td>
<td>How you enjoy working on each project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Value congruency</td>
<td>To what extent is each project consistent with the values that guide your life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identity</td>
<td>How typical of you each project is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Absorption</td>
<td>To what extent you became engrossed or deeply involved in a project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary dimensions defining the factor labeled structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Control</td>
<td>How much you feel in control of each project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Initiation</td>
<td>How much you feel responsible for having initiated each project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time adequacy</td>
<td>How much you feel that the amount of time you spend working on each project is adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary dimensions defining the factor labeled community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visibility</td>
<td>How visible each project is to the relevant people who are close to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other's view</td>
<td>How important each project is seen to be by relevant people who are close to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary dimensions defining the factor labeled efficacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Progress</td>
<td>How successful you have been in a project so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outcome</td>
<td>What you anticipate the outcome of each project to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary dimensions defining the factor labeled stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stress</td>
<td>How stressful it is for you to carry out each project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty</td>
<td>How difficult you find it to carry out each project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Challenge</td>
<td>To what extent each project is demanding and challenging to you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungrouped dimensions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negative impact</td>
<td>How much you feel that each project hinders other projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive impact</td>
<td>How much you feel that each project helps the others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the personal projects analysis module, dimensions are presented ungrouped to subjects.

to very positive (+2). Once these analyses have been done, and the impacts of each pair of projects have been assigned a value, an overall score can be tabulated. Scores are assigned for each of 90 cells within the 10 x 10 matrix. Note that 10 cells are excluded because no score is assigned for the impact of a project on itself (see Figure 1, which shows part of a matrix). Total scores can range from -180 (the person's overall inventory of personal projects is characterized by conflict) to +180 (or harmony). (Projects generally have a positive influence on each other.)

The cross-impact analysis can serve as a tool for helping persons to recognize the relative impact of specific projects on their own set of activities. This can influence decisions about the initiation, continuation, engagement, organization, value, and meaning of future activities. One alternative to this module involves a comparison of impact scores for pairs of individuals, which can provide valuable information for relationship counseling (see Little, 1987).

Attributes of the Approach: Is It Trustworthy and Genuine?

Carlson and Clark (1991) identified trustworthiness and genuineness as important attributes of measurement approaches used by scientists studying occupation. They defined trustworthiness as the extent to which a given approach yields information that is reliable, replicable, and subject to objective analysis. Genuineness was defined as the ability of an approach to represent the phenomenon under study realistically and relevantly. In Carlson and Clark's view, genuineness tends to increase as the variables and settings under study are more natural. Research approaches that meet each of these criteria in the study of occupation thus tend to collect data that offer individual variability without sacrificing the ability to analyze nomothetic or group data. Because personal projects analysis allows the identification of individually unique sets of activities that can then be compared across individuals according to common dimensions, it has characteristics of genuineness as well as trustworthiness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Getting a promotion</td>
<td></td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Getting Tom to like me better</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Losing 20 pounds</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td></td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Project system cross-impact matrix. This example shows part of a project system cross-impact matrix. Ratings range on a five-point scale from very negative (-2) to very positive (+2). Here, Project A, "getting a promotion," is viewed as having a very positive impact on the respondent's Project B, "getting Tom to like me better," and is assigned a value of +2. On the other hand, the requirements of Project B may be competing with the requirements for Project A, and a negative impact value of -1 is assigned to the corresponding cell. For a cross-impact matrix of 10 projects, 90 comparisons are assigned ratings, and the scores are summed. The possible range of scores is -180 to +180.
Reliability of Personal Projects Analysis

Data reported by Little (1988) and by Little et al. (1992) suggest moderate stability of projects with a robust underlying factor structure that seems to correlate well with personality dimensions. Because a person's individual projects may change over the course of a few weeks, stability coefficients have been found to diminish over time (Roy, 1987). In one study of internal consistency, estimates (coefficient alpha) ranged from .53 (for stress) to .77 (for value congruency), with the mean for the total set of dimensions being .70 (Little et al., 1992). These results led the researchers to conclude that the most stable project dimensions are those involving affective aspects of project evaluation (e.g., enjoyment, value congruency), with the least stable being those pertaining to structure (e.g., time adequacy and stress). Stated another way, a person's feelings about his or her projects are more stable over time than the circumstances under which he or she completes them.

Factor Structure

In factor analyses of personal projects, one might ask: “What basic concerns or influences seem to explain a person's feelings about his or her ongoing goal-oriented activities at any point in time?” For studies using the standard 17 core dimensions to rate identified projects, Little (1988) found that a group of five factors (i.e., meaning, structure, community, efficacy, stress) consistently seems to explain project ratings (see Table 2).

The first factor, meaning, embodies the general perceptions that one's projects are rewarding, worthwhile, and valuable. The structure factor relates to the sense that one's projects are organized and under control. The community factor embodies a social dimension relating to the perception that others view one's personal goal-related endeavors as important and worthwhile.

Two other factors organize the dimensional ratings of identified projects. Project efficacy relates to the perception that one will be successful in completing projects, which is explained by ratings on the dimensions of progress and outcome. Project stress seems to reflect aspects of difficulty, challenge, and stress. Perhaps reflecting the ambiguous nature of challenge (people welcome the opportunity to demonstrate mastery but loathe the possibility of failure), this factor has been found to be correlated with both positive and negative affect.

Project Factors and Occupational Therapy Models

These five factors that underlie personal projects are consistent with contemporary models of occupational therapy practice. For example, meaning has been described as that dimension of human agency that distinguishes occupations from mere actions (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1995). Englehardt (1983) described occupational therapists as “custodians of meaning” (p. 129), noting that occupations imbue everyday life with significance. Meaning is identified as an important dimension of occupation in models described by Christiansen and Baum (1997), Nelson (1996), and Trombly (1995).

The factor named structure, which describes project organization and control, seems to correspond to similar concepts related to lifestyle, time use, and patterns of occupation described by Kiellhoffner (1995), Fidler (1996), Christiansen and Baum (1997), and Cynkin and Robinson (1990). The factors of community, efficacy, and stress have been described in the occupational therapy literature in the context of perceived competence (Fidler, 1996; Gage & Polatajko, 1994), occupational role demands (Matheson & Bohr, 1997; Oakley, Kielhoffner, Barris, & Reichler, 1986), and adaptation (Nelson, 1996; Schultz & Schlake, 1997). Given the interest expressed by occupational therapists and occupational scientists regarding factors like meaning, structure, community, efficacy, and stress, personal projects analysis would seem to be a useful tool for the study of occupation. It provides a method for identifying and measuring the relative contribution of different occupations to these five major factors. These findings in turn yield insight into resources for as well as barriers to the successful completion of valued projects.

Since the development of the concept of personal projects, much research has been completed using the personal projects approach, particularly at Carleton University in Canada. Additionally, a wide range of topics has been researched. An assumption underlying this research is that personal projects serve as one way of meeting the adaptational demands imposed by the different environments in which people find themselves. A central tenet of occupational therapy models holds that occupations are a vehicle for adaptation and that by extension, they will influence health and well-being. In past research with personal projects, support has been found for these assumptions. For example, life satisfaction was found to be associated with involvement with projects that are important, enjoyable, and challenging within environmental contexts that offered social support and shared involvement (Palys & Little, 1983; Ruehman & Wolchik, 1988). In other studies, the core dimensions of personal projects have consistently accounted for between 20% and 25% of the variation in measures of depression and well-being (Little, 1988; Yetim, 1993).

Although most of the studies of personal projects have been accomplished using persons without known health problems, studies involving those with illness or disability can also provide useful insights about their lifestyles and perceptions. For example, Barris (1987) used personal projects analysis to study the lifestyles and environments of

The American Journal of Occupational Therapy
college women with eating disorders and found that they had more food-related personal projects, did more projects alone, enjoyed them less, and had projects linked to a more limited range of environmental settings than women whose eating behaviors were normal.

Karoly and Lecci (1993) studied the personal projects of college women who scored high on a scale of hypochondriasis. They found that this group, labeled somatizers, had more health-related projects and fewer academic goals among their most important life pursuits than did other students. The authors concluded that personal project analysis could have diagnostic potential in identifying persons with hypochondriasis.

The diagnostic potential of project characteristics was also found in a study of the personal projects of persons who scored high on scales of depression and anxiety (Lecci, Karoly, Briggs, & Kuhn, 1994). Both depression and anxiety were associated with projects rated high in stress and difficulty and low in structure, control, and expectations for positive outcome. Although both depression and anxiety showed a pattern of maladaptive functioning, projects were associated with ratings of less visibility to important others only in depression.

A study of Finnish students experiencing psychological distress indicated that they experienced more difficulty in accomplishing self-related projects than did their peers (Salmela-Aro, 1992). In this study, students with low expectations for success in accomplishing projects tended to have a diminished sense of coherence and lower self-esteem and were less satisfied with their lives than students with higher expectations for project success.

Using personal projects analysis, Lay (1987) studied a large sample of women and men to discern whether model profiles could be identified for procrastinators. Theories have suggested that rebelliousness, fear of failure or success, and avoidance of unpleasant tasks may explain tendencies to procrastinate. Procrastinators scored high on scales of neurotic disorganization and rebelliousness and had personal projects that were characterized by high stress, high difficulty, and low progress. They also tended to devote insufficient time to their projects. Procrastination was linked to disorganization, a lack of energy, need achievement, and self-esteem.

Finally, Ruehlman and Wolchik (1988) found that those persons viewed as most important in an individual’s life can have special significance in the support or hindrance of a project. They also found that hindrance and support are independent factors. That is, the lack of support by a significant person does not necessarily become a barrier to the completion of projects.

Collectively, these studies show that personal projects analysis was able to demonstrate important relationships between the characteristics of persons’ goal-related daily occupations and their dysfunctional states, whether physical or psychological. The studies also demonstrate the connection between individual personality traits and occupational behavior and the influence of environmental conditions, including social interaction, on occupational performance and well-being. Daily occupations reflect personality traits and dysfunctional states as well as contribute to them. Thus, studies of personal projects illustrate the reciprocal and dynamic nature of human occupation.

These studies underscore the importance of considering the person, his or her occupations, and the contexts in which occupations are conducted in formulating explanatory models that will be useful for intervention (Christiansen & Baum, 1997; Nelson, 1988).

Value of the Personal Projects Approach for Occupational Therapy

In recent articles, Wood (1996) and Carlson and Dunlea (1995) have written persuasively about the need for research on occupation to emanate from occupational therapy researchers. These authors view relevant basic information about occupation as essential for the generation of new knowledge and theories, often with practical applications.

Bonder (1993) observed that a complete understanding of meaningful activity must consider physical, social, and psychological variables. She argued that occupational therapy needs a better understanding of the contribution of psychological and social components to everyday performance and that the definitions and evaluations of relevant variables must be linked to a holistic view of meaningful activity.

In our view, the personal projects approach provides this link. Personal projects analysis also offers flexibility, stable psychometric properties, and an ability to capture the individual dimensions of daily lives. The personal projects approach offers an additional benefit of bridging research in psychology to that of occupational science and occupational therapy. In particular, the approach may lead to increased interest in the important links between individual dispositions and the organization and outcomes of daily occupations.

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