Life Task Pursuit in Social Groups: Balancing Self-Exploration and Social Integration

NANCY CANTOR
MARKUS KEMMELMEIER
JAY BASTEN

University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

DEBORAH A. PRENTICE
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey, USA

Personal well-being and resilience are contingent on the ability to negotiate and successfully pursue personal goals through life tasks and opportunities afforded by one's social environment. Our research addresses these processes by examining college students' participation in campus groups. We investigated simultaneous strivings toward the development of a distinct personal identity and toward social integration. Specifically, we argue that group participation is critical to self-definition because its enables personal exploration within the context of a network of stable social relationships. We also demonstrate that individual goals interact with group structure in shaping the nature and extent of group engagement. We conclude that successful resilience of self is a reflection of balance in life task participation, in which individuals integrate personal self-development with maintaining social connections.

Psychologists acknowledge a fundamental interplay between personal goals and situational and cultural affordances (Cantor, 1994; Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Whether carving out a career, making friends, or pursuing cherished values, individuals' aspirations, pursuits, and self-reflections unfold in a decidedly social life context. Personal well-being is contingent on the ability to successfully navigate the social environment by finding outlets for participation. As a consequence, personal vulnerability and resilience often turn on the ability to actively engage in and work with the opportunities afforded by others, either in interpersonal or group contexts. Being able to read the social context and to find ways to take part that are personally fulfilling, are prerequisites to resilience and self-definition (Tesser, this volume). Pursuing life tasks in a social context promotes healthy functioning through the intrinsic rewards of the activities themselves and by providing a forward-looking organization to daily life (e.g., Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). It also importantly shields individuals from social isolation and, potentially, from depression, by

Received 15 September 2001; accepted 10 October 2001.
Address correspondence to Nancy Cantor—Chancellor, Swanlund Administration Building, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: ncantor@admin.uiuc.edu

177
fostering a sense of belongingness and social integration with one's world (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999).

The Social Nature of Life Task Participation

An interesting feature of life task participation is how social and dynamic it is—that is, how much of it depends on the willingness to try new things in new social settings. For example, in a study on the development of well-being across the life span, Harlow and Cantor (1996) found that taking advantage of new opportunities for participation in social groups and voluntary organizations was responsible for significant increases in life satisfaction among retirees. Further, life task participation can play an important role in promoting personal growth. Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, and Snyder (1998) showed that among adolescents the experience of volunteering sparked a re-evaluation of one's identity and important life goals.

In a similar vein, college life provides a natural laboratory for social self-definition processes (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). The transition from home and high school to college life tends to bring into focus two separate, but related issues. On the one hand, students focus a good deal of personal energy and attention on “finding themselves,” that is, on the exploration of their own interests, skills, and attitudes. Indeed, for most students this constitutes the first time that they have the freedom to structure their time, their friendships, and their activities in ways that serve to articulate a personal statement. Moreover, college students newly encounter peers from a far wider range of geographic, ethnic-racial, or class backgrounds, and with a wider range of interests and talents than they experienced in high school. These opportunities often lead students to cross social boundaries, develop new skills, and take part in new groups and activities, therein changing themselves as a person.

Whereas traditionally theorists have focused on issues of exploration and self-development during this life period (Erikson, 1968), the radical nature of the changes implied by leaving home may put students at risk of feeling socially isolated and unable to deal with new challenges. Thus, being in a new and often unfamiliar environment also prompts a search for security and “place.” Students try to find or carve out a stable social niche for themselves, which provides them with rewarding social contacts and social support to sustain well-being. In fact, the security afforded by a safe and accepting social environment may be a prerequisite to personal exploration and self-development (Leary, this volume). That is, resilience of the self in dealing with the challenges of college life may be in part a reflection of how students negotiate the complementary strivings to explore their intrinsic interests and to find security through social integration.

In our research we have studied these questions by focusing on the role of campus groups in students' identity development and well-being (e.g., Cantor & Prentice, 1996). We have repeatedly found that the vast majority of college students spend significant and regular time, at least 3 to 5 hours per week, in various campus groups, ranging from sororities and fraternities to religious groups to service and issue-oriented groups or athletic teams. Through participation in groups, students may pursue personal interests and a variety of personal goals. Additionally, participation in the formal group activity often spills over into informal activity with groupmates and these individuals then become an important part of students' social networks. As such, campus groups become a proving ground for self-exploration in which “finding oneself” is actually closely linked with “finding a place” in a social group.
Well-Being and Group Involvement

Because group involvement allows students to pursue both the salient goals of “finding oneself” and “finding a place,” participation is an important source of student well-being and social self-definition. This can be illustrated in data from 257 undergraduate students who participated in a diverse set of campus groups. As part of an ongoing research project on college student development, participants responded to questions concerning their well-being and group involvement as well as five items concerning their personal growth. In particular, students indicated the extent to which they had taken advantage of new opportunities at college, expanded their interests, found a place at the university, developed a clear picture of what they wanted in life, and developed new and meaningful relationships (α = .76).

A regression analysis on those responses ($R^2 = .23$, $F[9, 218] = 7.26, p < .001$) showed that identification with one’s group was reliably related to personal growth, $B = .44, p < .001$ (gender, age, and race were controlled in all analyses). Similarly, greater levels of satisfaction with their experience in campus groups were related to individuals expanding their personal horizons, $B = .11, p < .009$. These results underscore the point that personal growth occurs in coordination with group participation, and vice versa. This is also apparent in the interpersonal bonds that participants forge with other members of the group. The more students’ network of friends overlaps with the members of their campus group, the more likely were the students to have expanded their horizons, $B = .13, p < .04$. This result further illustrates the dual function of social groups as providing a place for social integration for individuals and as furnishing opportunities for personal exploration.

A similar analysis of responses to Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale ($R^2 = .15$, $F[8, 220] = 4.75, p < .001$) showed that satisfaction with their campus group as well as group identification predicted higher levels of self-worth, $B = .19, p < .001$ and $B = .19, p = .051$. These findings show that students’ sense of self is consistently linked to the group settings in which they participate.

Characterizing the Social Ecology of Group Life

Whereas group participation has general effects on student well-being, the explication of social self-definition processes requires a more detailed understanding of the ecology of different social groups—what they afford members, why people join them, how they constrain the behavior of members, what they expect of members, and so on. This is especially important in the college context, where students may engage in a wide variety of diverse activities and groups. The nature of a group, its structure and composition, may critically shape the extent to which it can provide a secure social environment and/or an exciting arena for exploration. Because little previous research has tried to characterize various types of group environments and experiences that different groups provide (see Jacoby & Babchuk, 1963, for an exception), an important step in our research was to empirically characterize the various different social groups on college campuses.

For this purpose, we interviewed leaders of 165 groups on the University of Michigan campus, reflecting the diversity of campus groups open to students, including, but not limited to, fraternities, sororities, religious groups, academic clubs, various intramural and club-sports teams, performing arts groups, volunteer
organizations and student government groups. Using factor-analytic and cluster-analytic techniques, these data allowed us to distinguish three general types of campus groups. Subsequent analyses involving comparisons of the experiences of group members corroborated this distinction; hence, we argue that these three types capture unique social environments.

The cluster of intrinsic interest groups is comprised mainly of academic clubs, intramural sports teams, and issue-oriented groups (e.g., environmental groups, political groups). Although intrinsic interest groups entail a sense of community among their members, the common denominator among the members is the involvement in the activity or issue around which the group is centered. This is expressed in members’ relatively low levels of identification with and stable commitment to the group as such. At the same time, with their focus on group-centered activity, intrinsic interest groups do provide an ideal environment for students interested in meeting new people, learning new skills, and exploring new activities, but in a relatively fluid social setting.

By contrast, participation in a second cluster of instrumental groups brings with it a substantial sense of personal identification with the group and a strong sense of group cohesion. Examples of these groups include, among others, Greek organizations or ROTC. Being part of these groups is often associated with substantial benefits to one’s career or social life. For example, many members of instrumental groups tend to have friends who are also members of the group. At the same time, membership also comes with substantial cost to the individual, as applicants have to meet a number of requirements and be willing to commit a substantial amount of their time to the activity. Another distinguishing feature of instrumental groups is the tightness of their structure, as they tend to have a firm and stable leadership arrangement. The emphasis on group cohesiveness should be particularly conducive to students who are interested in finding a “place” in a stable social environment.

A third cluster of groups was termed identity groups as they were based on aspects of individuals’ backgrounds and experiences, such as their cultural identity, artistic background, and religious affiliation. Examples included religious groups, cultural heritage groups, and performing arts groups, as well as some athletic teams. Although this similarity in background and experience among members fosters high levels of identification with the group, there is also the perception that members do not share many other characteristics. In this sense, identity groups do not necessarily entail a strong sense of community. Further, access to the groups is generally not restricted and benefits to one’s career or social life are less palpable than in the case of the instrumental groups.

Students join these three types of groups with largely different purposes in mind. An analysis of the reasons students give for joining the various types of groups showed that a large majority of those joining intrinsic interest groups are focused on their interest in the activity or issue (74%). By contrast, students joining instrumental groups are less interested in the group’s activity (58%), although members of both types of groups say they are interested in developing their skills. Perhaps more importantly, the decision to join instrumental groups appears to be subject to peer influence, as a substantial proportion (58%) of individuals in these groups said that they joined because their friends did, a number substantially lower for those in intrinsic interest groups (40%) and identity groups (41%). Members of identity groups were more likely to say that their goal was to make friends (65%) than those of intrinsic interest or instrumental groups (56% and 45%); yet, they were less
interested in making contacts for the future compared to members of the other groups (35% vs. 49% and 55%, respectively).

Individual Pursuits within the Context of Social Groups:
A Person-Environment Perspective

Because life task participation occurs in a distinctly social context, individual outcomes are a joint function of the pursuit of personal goals as well as the opportunities and challenges afforded by one's immediate social environment. Consequently, our central goal was to demonstrate how social contexts interact with students' agendas in shaping their behavior and self-definition (Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Thus, students who differ in the extent to which they emphasize "finding a place" or "exploring their interests" may find themselves in group environments that may or may not be conducive to the goals underlying their life task participation. By distinguishing three general types of groups we were able to explore the particular opportunities and challenges they afford to students with varying motivational foci.

As part of the aforementioned research project, students completed the 36-item Rokeach value survey (Rokeach, 1973) as a measure of latent goal orientations. Because respondents rated the extent to which they endorsed each value, we were able to extract six second-order factors, two of which are of interest here. Security values reflect a person's tendency to adhere to acceptable social norms, presumably because they reduce ambiguity and increase predictability of the social world (cf. Schwartz, 1992). On the other hand, independence values stress self-reliance and ability. These values heavily focus on personal achievement and accomplishment, a domain that is central for self-definition processes in a challenging college environment. These two value constructs served as proxies for individual goal orientations toward social integration and security, and self-exploration.

Whereas campus groups generally afford some fulfillment of strivings both for security and for self-exploration, their different ecologies (e.g., whether they are tightly structured and cohesive or not) should make them differentially suitable to pursue particular goals. Just as a party is conducive to socializing and a library to studying, particular campus groups will be most likely to engage students' strivings for security or for exploration, as a function in part of their structure and organization. For example, in the tightly-knit and regulated environment of an instrumental group, the time a student spends in the group should be associated with how strongly that particular individual is striving to find a secure and stable group within which to participate. By contrast, this particular motivational focus may well not be relevant to predicting group involvement in the context of the more fluid intrinsic interest groups. We explored this in an analysis in which we related students' security values to the average weekly time they spent in various types of groups. We ran a hierarchical regression model that allowed us to examine the interaction of values and group type (instrumental, intrinsic, identity). Our final model explained 26% of the overall variance, $F(12, 210) = 6.11, p < .001$. To illustrate our results, we report the results of a simple slopes analysis, which reveals whether for a given type of group there is a significant relationship between values and time spent in the group.

As expected, there was a positive relationship between security values and time spent in instrumental groups, $H_o: B = .38, p < .02$. The more students were oriented toward stability and security in their life, the more time they spent in their instrumental group; that is, in a group likely to afford them a stable social environment. By contrast, this relationship was not found for participants in intrinsic interest
groups. $H_o = 0.29, p > .10$, nor for identity groups. $H_o = -0.23, p > .30$. This differential association of values and group involvement illustrates how groups vary in the extent to which they engage particular latent goals among their members. This conclusion is underscored by the observation that participants in the three different types of groups did not differ in their overall endorsement of security values. In other words, within each type of group setting, there were individuals primed to play out their strivings for security by involvement in the group. However, unique characteristics of the group setting, such as the presence of stable leadership and member requirements, were important in determining whether or not group life would become an outlet for security-seeking.

A somewhat different dynamic emerged with regard to identification with the group. How do individuals view the nature of their group membership once they have decided to join the group? That is, how personally-identified with the group do they become after joining, and to what extent is this shaped by their values? We expected independence values in particular to shape one's attachment to the group, especially in cases where individuals have considerable freedom to shape the nature of their participation in a group. Specifically, the fluid structure and relatively low level of group cohesion in the intrinsic interest groups should encourage participants to individually shape their attachments to fit their preferred level of self-directed motivation. This is much less likely in the case of instrumental groups in which a formal entrance/initiation process cements one's attachment to the highly structured group life. It is also unlikely in the context of identity groups in which there is a salient identity characteristic that forms the basis of membership in and identification with the group. Indeed, a logistic regression analysis predicting level of identification supported this proposition, $X^2(10, n = 226) = 46.96, p < .001$. In the intrinsic interest groups there was a negative relationship between group identification and the strength of students' strivings for independence ($H_o = -1.33, p < .003, OR = 0.27, 95\% CI .11-.62$). Students who were particularly self-motivated and self-directed toward personal accomplishments were more ambivalent in their attachments to intrinsic interest groups. By contrast, this value orientation was unrelated to students' identification with instrumental ($H_o = -0.03, ns., OR = 1.21, 95\% CI 0.70-2.08$) or identity ($H_o = -0.08, ns., OR = 0.95, 95\% CI .43-2.13$) groups. As in the case of intrinsic interest groups, there were members of instrumental and identity groups who were strongly motivated toward independence and personal accomplishment, however, these latent values did not affect their attachment to their group. Rather, it was in the more loosely-structured intrinsic interest group environment, where students may have felt a need to actively position themselves vis-à-vis their group, that latent goals and values emerged as relevant for group identification.

Flexibility in Self-Definition and the Diversity of Social Experiences

Ultimately, self-definition processes unfold for all of us in multiple settings, and involve both exploration of one's intrinsic interests and the pleasures that come from strong social commitments and tight integration with others. Therefore, it seems likely that individuals typically strike a balance in their life task participation, so as to afford the exploration of new interests and experiences, while also securing ties to others and group identifications that provide for a socially-connected self-definition. Yet, which goals individuals pursue may be highly dependent on the situation, such that individuals explore new interests in some settings, whereas they enjoy the
stability of a stable group in others. For some individuals, though, the social context of self-definition may always be defined by strong commitments to cohesive groups, but the possibilities for exploration may come within the group as a function of the diversity of fellow participants. Indeed, many people may need the security afforded by membership in a tightly-structured group as a starting place for self-exploration. For example, those students who spent a great deal of time in the tightly-structured instrumental groups were especially motivated to find security, and yet they were also able to cultivate new interests and pursuits with their groupmates. In this regard, they may have used the security of their group as a jumping off point for self-discovery. A key to their success, therefore, may be their proclivity to utilize the affordances of their group in ways that fit their personal latent values and goals (Mischel, this volume).

Whereas the means by which individuals can define themselves through their life task participation are flexible, the above example suggests an interdependence between explorative and security pursuits. Indeed, we propose that resilience of self and successful social functioning are associated with achieving a balance between exploration of new interests and experiences and securing ties to other individuals and groups. A one-sided pursuit of new interests may lead individuals to spread themselves too thin, thus resulting in stress and inability to cope with unexpected challenges. Similarly, excessive focus on new activities may keep individuals from maintaining a stable social network and foster social isolation, putting them at risk for dysphoria and depression. Conversely, self-definition might well suffer if participation in the group insulates one from variety, diversity, and novelty—for example, if group engagement becomes too inward-looking and too much time is spent in the company of similar others. The consequence may be boredom and frustration. Thus, as with many psychological processes, healthy social self-definition may depend upon moderation, as contrasted with the excesses of either extreme fluidity or too intense and insular commitment.

References