Motivation has mood swings too

Evidence from an Ecological Momentary Assessment study

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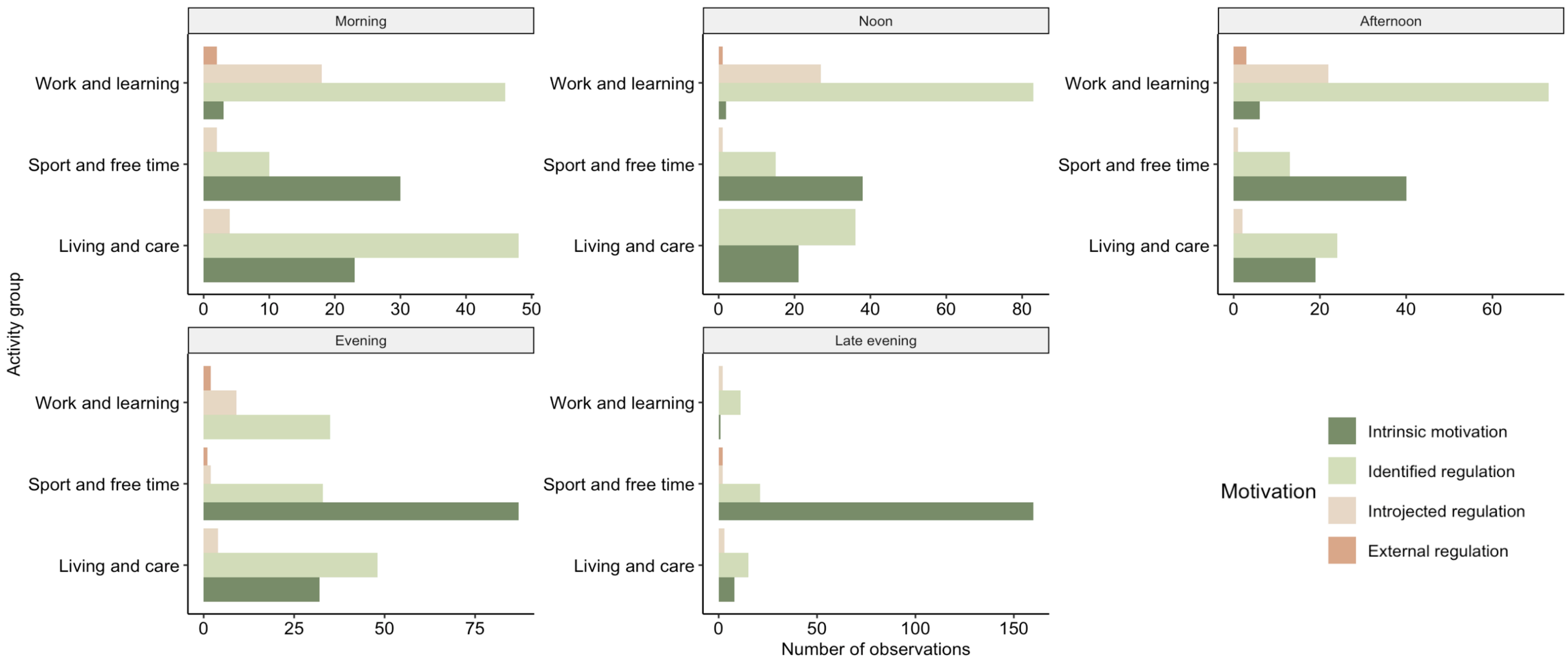
Introduction: Daily activities form the core of human functioning and well-being. According to the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model, these activities emerge from the continuous interaction between the individual, their environment, and the occupations they engage in. Understanding why people engage in certain activities also requires attention to motivation, a central construct in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which describes how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations drive human behavior and daily engagement. Although motivation plays a key role in shaping everyday occupations, it is typically assessed using retrospective questionnaires, which are susceptible to recall bias, social desirability bias, and global overgeneralization. To uncover the real-time connection between motivation and daily activities, assessments must capture experiences in the moment. Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) offers a solution by collecting repeated, real-time data in participants' natural environments. This allows motivation and daily activities to be studied as they unfold, providing a more accurate and contextualized understanding. This sub-study focuses specifically on examining momentary motivation and its relationship with daily activities using EMA data collected from healthy adults.

Method: A seven-day EMA study was conducted with 46 healthy adults (13 men, 33 women; aged 18–65 years). Participants received five semi-random prompts per day via the m-Path application. At each of these five daily prompts, participants were asked : (1) to indicate the activity they were currently engaged in, and (2) to report their motivation for performing that activity. Activities were categorized into three domains: work and learning, sports and free time, and living and care. Motivation was assessed using four items based on SDT, corresponding to different types of motivation: intrinsic motivation ("because I just feel like it"), identified regulation ("because I believe it is important or meaningful"), introjected regulation ("because I would feel guilty or fear criticism otherwise"), and external regulation ("because I want to gain approval or recognition from others"). Data were analyzed in R, with time-dependent analyses performed to examine patterns across the five daily measurement points. Overall adherence to the EMA protocol was 82%.



Results: Daily activity patterns showed clear variation across the day. In the morning, participants most often engaged in living and care or work and learning activities. During noon and afternoon, work and learning became the predominant activity category. In the evening and late evening, engagement shifted strongly toward sport and free time, which became the most frequently reported activity in these time periods. Motivation also varied by activity type and moment of the day. Autonomous forms of motivation—intrinsic motivation and identified regulation—were consistently the most prevalent. These types of motivation were especially prominent during sport and free time activities throughout the day. Controlled motivation (introjected and external regulation) occurred less frequently but was more common during Work and learning, particularly from morning through afternoon. Living and care activities displayed a mixed motivational pattern, showing both autonomous and controlled motives in moderate proportions. Overall, autonomous motivation appeared to be the primary driver of momentary engagement, especially in leisure-related activities, whereas controlled motivation was a more prominent driver for work and learning activities.

Conclusion: Autonomous motivation played a central role in momentary engagement across the day, particularly during leisure activities. In contrast, controlled motivation was more often associated with work- and study-related tasks. These findings demonstrate how EMA can capture meaningful fluctuations in both daily activities and motivation in real time, offering valuable insight into everyday human functioning.

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