



# The role of intrinsic values for self-growth and community contribution at different life stages: Differentially predicting the vitality of university students and teachers over one year



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## ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic values and research has demonstrated that prioritizing intrinsic relative to extrinsic values is related to greater well-being. Intrinsic values have typically been amalgamated yet based on theories of development (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1980), we prospectively examined the relationship between specific intrinsic values and vitality among people at different life stages. We hypothesized that valuing self-growth, reflecting the self-exploration involved in developing an identity, would be particularly important for the vitality of college students ( $N = 99$ ). Valuing community contribution, consistent with the generativity stage of later adulthood, was expected to be more important for the vitality of schoolteachers ( $N = 90$ ). Supporting our hypotheses, regression analyses showed that self-growth was relatively more likely than community contribution to be associated with increased vitality among university students, whereas community contribution was relatively more likely than self-growth to be associated with increased vitality among teachers. The analyses controlled for participants' mean ratings of intrinsic and extrinsic values. Change in self-growth values over one year, moreover, predicted students' vitality at the end of the year. The potential for integrating theories of development with self-determination theory's conceptualization of values is discussed.

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Intrinsic values for self-growth, close relationships, and community contribution have generally been studied together based on self-determination theory's proposition that these values satisfy psychological needs and oppose extrinsic values for wealth, status, and an attractive image (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A large body of research has found that when individuals prioritize intrinsic relative to extrinsic values, they experience greater well-being (see Kasser, 2002 for a review). Erikson's (1980) theory of psychosocial stages, however, suggests that the importance of specific intrinsic values may depend on an individual's life stage. Erikson proposed eight developmental stages across the lifespan, each with its own psychosocial task. Identity during adolescence and early adulthood, a stage focused on an emerging sense of self, and generativity during adulthood, a stage focused on making a contribution, are considered to be central constructs of development in Erikson's theory (Erikson, 1982; Karcher & Benne, 2008). We therefore focus on these two

stages in our study of young and midlife adults.<sup>1</sup> We examined the two intrinsic values that reflect these stages – self-growth and community contribution – and hypothesized that they would differentially predict the vitality in two different groups of individuals: university students and adults pursuing a teaching career.

## 1. Self-determination theory of values

In line with humanistic theories (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1964), self-determination theorists have described intrinsic values, such as self-growth and community contribution, as being expressive of natural growth tendencies, leading to greater well-being (Kasser, 2002). In contrast, extrinsic values, such as wealth and status, do not satisfy an

<sup>1</sup> Although Erikson proposed a life stage between identity and generativity, intimacy versus isolation, other theorists have remarked that intimacy is an important need throughout the lifespan (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and that the experience of intimacy is interwoven with identity and generativity (Josselson, 2000). Furthermore, in a sample of 18 to 82 year old adults, Sheldon and Kasser (2001) found that unlike identity and generativity, intimacy did not vary with age.

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individual's psychological needs and are typically engaged in as a means to an end. In support of self-determination theory, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that prioritizing intrinsic relative to extrinsic values is associated with greater well-being, as measured by self-report and clinical interviews of individuals' vitality, social functioning, depression, anxiety, and physical ailments (see Kasser, 2002 for a review). Furthermore, two experimental studies have provided causal evidence for a link between intrinsic values and well-being (Sheldon, Gunz, Nichols, & Ferguson, 2010; Lokes, Hope, Gouveia, Koestner, & Philippe, 2012). However, both of these studies were limited in duration, spanning only four weeks. Few studies have examined the influence of values over longer periods of time (see Niemiec, Ryan & Deci, 2009 and Hope, Milyavskaya, Holding, & Koestner, 2014 for exceptions). The present study, therefore, extends previous research by examining the relationship between values and well-being over the course of a year, and specifically whether intrinsic values for self-growth and community contribution may differentially predict the vitality of university students and teachers.

## 2. Valuing self-growth during college

As Arnett (2000) explains, individuals from 18 into their twenties are in a unique developmental period of life, which he has termed emerging adulthood. During this time, young people explore career and educational paths, as well as experiment with romantic and sexual roles, thereby gaining life experience before taking on adult responsibilities. Of all periods of life, emerging adulthood has been distinguished as the one that offers the greatest opportunity for identity exploration. Erikson (1950) originally outlined identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life yet he did not specify ages for his stages of development and along with other theorists and researchers has noted the prolonged adolescence occurring in industrialized societies (Côté & Levine, 1989; Erikson, 1968).

It follows that among the values that self-determination theorists have identified as intrinsic, self-growth may be particularly important for the vitality of emerging adults. Waterman (2011) describes identity formation as a process of self-discovery and Arnett (2007) points out that emerging adulthood is a period when individuals have the opportunity to focus on their self-development. Supporting Erikson's (1968) theory of identity, researchers have shown that emerging adulthood is associated with experimentation (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006) and with exploration of positive roles and orientations, including prosocial behaviour (Padilla-Walker, Barry, Carroll, Madsen, & Nelson, 2008). Across cultures, researchers have further found that engaging with identity issues during college and forming an identity contributes to greater well-being (Vleioras & Bosma, 2005; Hofer, Kärtner, Chasiotis, Busch, & Kiessling, 2007; Waterman, 2007). Waterman (2007) points out, however, that the research linking identity formation and well-being has been conducted at one time-point and that longitudinal studies are needed. Given Waterman's conclusion that identity formation and well-being are associated when young people reflect on identity alternatives before committing to an identity, valuing self-development may be particularly important for young adults in college.

## 3. Valuing community contribution among schoolteachers during adulthood

Whereas valuing self-growth may be especially important for young adults, valuing community contribution may be particularly important for the well-being of adults. Erikson (1980) described the central stage of adulthood, the longest stage, as resolving the midlife crisis of generativity versus stagnation. He explained that generativity involves "establishing and guiding the next generation" (1950, p. 267), by contributing to one's local community and improving the world for

future generations. Generativity has been described as the "hallmark of psychosocial maturity in the adult years" (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993, p. 221). Individuals who fail to achieve generativity become stagnant, regressing to earlier stages of development (Erikson, 1982) and feeling less fulfilled and content (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moskowitz, 2000). By valuing contributions to one's community, reflecting their generative concern, adults may therefore experience greater well-being.

In support of Erikson's theory, researchers have shown that concerns for generativity and a focus on taking care of others and one's community tend to be more present as individuals age (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). In their study of 3032 young, midlife, and older adults, Keyes and Ryff (1998) showed that overall adults aged 40 to 59 tended to have the highest levels of generativity. Researchers have further found that generativity is a stronger predictor of subjective well-being in midlife adults, compared to younger adults (Ackerman et al., 2000). As a first test of whether community contribution specifically predicts well-being, we studied adults in a profession dedicated to educating the next generation, who may therefore experience greater vitality when they focus on community relative to self-growth.

## 4. Present study

The tradition of eudaimonia considers well-being to be the degree to which individuals are fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001), living in accordance with their true self and feeling intensely alive and authentic (Waterman, 1993). Vitality, an indicator of eudaimonic well-being, concerns the degree to which a person feels energetic and alive (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Importantly, vitality is related both to psychological factors, such as self-actualization, self-esteem, and mental health, and to somatic factors, such as a person's experience of their physical health (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Given that Erikson's theory is compatible with eudaimonic well-being (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002), we chose vitality to prospectively assess the relationship between participants' well-being and their values for self-growth and community.

We hypothesized that valuing self-growth would be more important than valuing community contribution for the vitality of university students. Specifically, we expected that the more that university students valued self-growth, relative to community contribution, the greater their vitality over one year later, and that increases in values for self-growth over the year would predict vitality at the end of that year. In contrast, we hypothesized that valuing community contribution would be more important than valuing self-growth for the vitality of schoolteachers and that the more that teachers valued community contribution relative to self-growth, the greater their vitality over one year later.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Participants and procedure

#### 5.1.1. University student sample

The sample of undergraduate students was recruited through online classified advertisements directed at the two English-speaking universities in Montreal, Quebec, as well as from a paid participant pool at one of these universities. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years old (three participants over 30 were excluded), for a total of 190 participants, 138 female and 52 male. Participants reported their ethnic background as White (58%), Asian (21%), mixed White and Asian (3%), Hispanic (3%), Black (2%), or they did not provide this information (13%). They reported studying social sciences (36%), physical sciences (24%), arts (11%), engineering (9%), business (6%), nursing (1%), or either had not declared a major or did not indicate it on the questionnaire (13%).

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