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## Raising trophy kids: The role of mothers' contingent self-esteem in maternal promotion of extrinsic goals



Bart Soenens<sup>a, \*</sup>, Dorien Wuyts<sup>a</sup>, Maarten Vansteenkiste<sup>a</sup>,  
Geneviève A. Mageau<sup>b</sup>, Katrijn Brenning<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ghent University, Belgium

<sup>b</sup> University of Montreal, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of mothers' child-invested contingent self-esteem, that is, their tendency to hinge their self-worth on their child's achievements, in maternal promotion of extrinsic goals, as perceived by adolescents. It was also examined whether maternal promotion of extrinsic goals would, in turn, relate to adolescents' Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Participants were 184 mothers and their adolescent children (66% female). Maternal child-invested contingent self-esteem predicted adolescent-perceived maternal promotion of extrinsic goals, even when taking into account the variance shared between the promotion of extrinsic goals and mothers' use of a controlling parenting style. Maternal child-invested contingent self-esteem also moderated associations between mothers' personal pursuit of extrinsic goals and their promotion of those goals, such that the association between mothers' own extrinsic goals and their promotion of those goals was significant only among mothers high on child-invested contingent self-esteem. Maternal promotion of extrinsic goals was, in turn, related to adolescent SDO, suggesting that the dynamics examined in this study ultimately relate to adolescents' social and ideological development.

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Some parents emphasize to their children the importance of goals such as being rich, being popular, and being good-looking. Although these goals are appealing at first sight, they are known to provide little lasting satisfaction and happiness in the longer run (Kasser, 2002). Why do some parents emphasize such extrinsic goals, sometimes even at the expense of more inherently rewarding intrinsic goals such as contributing to the community (e.g., through volunteering work)? In this study, we examined the potential role of maternal child-invested contingent self-esteem, that is, the tendency for parents to hinge their self-worth upon their children's achievement. We additionally examined (a) the interplay of mothers' personal endorsement of extrinsic goals and child-invested contingent self-esteem in predicting their promotion of extrinsic goals, as perceived by adolescents, and (b) the potential contribution of these dynamics to adolescents' Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), a social-political attitude predisposing people to prejudice.

\* Corresponding author. Department of Developmental, Social, and Personality Psychology, Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium. Tel.: +32 9 2649134.

E-mail address: [Bart.Soenens@ugent.be](mailto:Bart.Soenens@ugent.be) (B. Soenens).

## Extrinsic and intrinsic goals and goal promotion

In Goal Content Theory, one of the mini-theories within Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010), a distinction is made between intrinsic goals such as community contribution, affiliation, and personal development and extrinsic goals such as financial aspirations, physical attractiveness, and fame. Many studies have shown that extrinsic goals are distinct from intrinsic goals and that both types of goals are related differently to individuals' personal and social functioning (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Extrinsic, relative to intrinsic, goals have been found to relate to lower personal well-being (e.g., Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014; Kasser & Ryan, 1996), decreased academic performance and motivation (e.g., Ku, Dittmar, & Banerjee, 2012), and even symptoms of psychopathology including bulimic symptoms (e.g., Thogerson-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, & Nikitaras, 2010).

According to SDT, extrinsic goals are detrimental because, in contrast to intrinsic goals, they fail to provide satisfaction and can even undermine satisfaction of individuals' basic psychological needs, that is, the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Duriez, 2008). That is, when pursuing extrinsic goals people would feel pressured to demonstrate their personal worth through the attainment of extrinsic goods (autonomy frustration), may more easily doubt their capacity to achieving their goals (competence frustration), and would be more likely to engage in a competitive interpersonal comparison that alienates them from others (relatedness frustration). Research indeed suggests that, whereas intrinsic goals are related positively to need satisfaction, extrinsic goals relate to need frustration (e.g., Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009; Unanue, Vignoles, Dittmar, & Vansteenkiste, 2014).

While the majority of studies grounded in Goal Content Theory have examined the correlates of the *personal* endorsement of intrinsic, relative to extrinsic, goals recent research begins to address the *contextual promotion* of extrinsic (relative to intrinsic) goals by others, including socialization figures (Vansteenkiste et al., 2008). For instance with regard to parents, it has been shown that when parents encourage their children to pursue extrinsic (relative to intrinsic) goals, children display a more fragile type of self-worth (Wouters et al., 2014) and poorer learning, as indexed for instance by test anxiety and lower grades (Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Michou, & Soenens, 2013). Given the detrimental outcomes associated with parents' promotion of extrinsic goals, it is important to identify its antecedents. Herein, we address the role of parental child-invested contingent self-esteem.

## Parental goals and child-invested contingent self-esteem

Child-invested contingent self-esteem refers to parents' tendency to hinge their self-worth on their children's achievements (Ng, Pomerantz, & Deng, 2014). It is characteristic of parents who seek to enhance their self-worth through the child's accomplishments. As a consequence, their self-esteem is likely to vary with the child's performance: Parents feel more proud and successful when the child is successful, while the parents' self-worth plummets when the child fails to meet standards of excellence. Parents high on child-invested contingent self-esteem would engage in more controlling or pressuring parenting because they would experience the use of controlling tactics as the fastest and most cost-efficient route to push the child towards success and, consequently, to boost their own self-worth. Research has confirmed that child-invested contingent self-esteem is indeed related to more controlling parenting (Grolnick, Price, Beiswenger, & Sauck, 2007; Ng et al., 2014; Wuyts, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Assor, in press).

We aimed to add to this small body of work by examining whether parental child-invested contingent self-esteem would be related not only to parental style (i.e., *how* controlling parents interact with the child) but also to the content of the goals they highlight towards the child (i.e., *what* kind of goals they promote). Specifically, we hypothesized that child-invested contingent self-esteem would be related to parental promotion of extrinsic (but not intrinsic) goals. The child's attainment of extrinsic goals would be conceived by parents high on child-invested contingent self-esteem as a critical indicator of the child's success. This would be the case because, at least in Western society, extrinsic goals are highly socially valued (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007) and are often portrayed as a key indicator of success (Dittmar, 2007). As such, parents high on child-invested contingent self-esteem may anticipate more social recognition and a stronger boost to their own ego when their child aspires to and eventually attains extrinsic goals. Because the outcomes associated with the attainment of intrinsic goals are less visible, yield less direct social recognition, and — as such — are less likely to result in an immediate boost in self-worth, child-invested contingent self-esteem was expected to be unrelated or related negatively to the promotion of intrinsic goals.

Another, perhaps more obvious, antecedent of parents' promotion of extrinsic goals is parents' own pursuit of extrinsic goals. Research indeed shows that, on average, parents tend to promote to their children the goals they value themselves (e.g., Benish-Weisman, Levy, & Knafo, 2013). Accordingly, it can be expected that parents who pursue extrinsic goals themselves are more likely to promote those goals towards their child. It should be noted, however, that this association is far from perfect, indicating that parents differ in the degree to which they promote the goals they hold themselves to their children. Herein, we forward the hypothesis that mothers' child-invested contingent self-esteem affects the degree to which mothers' personal extrinsic goals pursuit manifests in the promotion of those goals to their children. Mothers who value the importance of extrinsic goals themselves and who, at the same time, invest their self-worth in the child's achievements would be most likely to promote extrinsic goals towards their child because they anticipate that their child's attainment of extrinsic goals will contribute to their worth as a parent and as a person.

In contrast, child-invested contingent self-esteem was not expected to moderate associations between mothers' personal intrinsic goals and their promotion of intrinsic goals. Research has shown that intrinsic goals are typically regulated on the

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