



# Life goals predict environmental behavior: Cross-cultural and longitudinal evidence



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## ABSTRACT

Prioritizing intrinsic life goals (self-development, community involvement, relationships) rather than extrinsic ones (money, fame, image) is said to foster not only personal wellbeing, but also pro-social behavior such as protecting the environment. We explored concurrent and prospective links between intrinsic (versus extrinsic) life goals and self-reported environmentally responsible behavior, using correlational and longitudinal data from adult participants in a mass consumer society (UK) and a fast developing nation (Chile). In both countries, the importance of intrinsic (versus extrinsic) life goals was associated cross-sectionally with environmentally responsible behavior, even after controlling for possible effects of environmental worldviews and environmental identification. In longitudinal analyses, life goals prospectively predicted environmentally responsible behavior over a two-year period, whereas, rather unexpectedly, environmental worldviews and environmental identification did not. We conclude that focusing on intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, life goals may be important not just for individuals' wellbeing, but also for the well-being of future generations.

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## 1. Introduction

Climate change and global warming have been portrayed as the biggest human challenges of the 21st Century (United Nations Development Programme, 2007). The future of the environment is in serious danger, mainly due to human consumption activity (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Commission for Environmental Cooperation, 2002; Crompton & Kasser, 2009; Sheldon, Nichols, & Kasser, 2011). In this process, peoples' life goals and aspirations are thought to have played a key role that deserves a deeper understanding, so as to protect the well-being of future generations (Crompton & Kasser, 2009; Tanner, 1999).

A few studies have suggested that life goals might have implications for environmental behaviors. For example, it has been found that people who attach a higher relative importance to extrinsic values and life goals tend to engage in more damaging environmental behavior (Banerjee & McKeage, 1994; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Sheldon & McGregor,

2000). However, the existing evidence has been mostly limited to a small number of cross-sectional studies, conducted among students and other young people in primarily Western nations, and it remains unclear to what extent intrinsic (versus extrinsic) life goals are prospectively implicated in environmentally responsible behavior, over and above the effects of other likely predictors such as a pro-environmental worldview and a sense of identification with the natural environment. Here, we explored cross-culturally whether intrinsic (versus extrinsic) life goals would predict environmentally responsible behavior, over and above any effects of environmental worldviews and environmental identification, among adults in the UK and Chile. Moreover, we used both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, in order to provide evidence for both the magnitude and the direction of the relationships observed.

### 1.1. Environmental behavior

Research has shown that several environmental problems (e.g., global warming, air pollution, water shortages) are rooted in human behaviors (Steg & Vlek, 2009; Vlek & Steg, 2007). Here, following Steg and Vlek (2009), we define environmental behavior broadly "as all types of behavior that change the availability of materials or energy from the environment or alter the structure and

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dynamics of ecosystems or the biosphere” (p. 29). In this sense, pro-environmental behavior “refers to behavior that harms the environment as little as possible, or even benefits the environment” (p. 29). Factors influencing pro-environmental behaviors have been studied from different theoretical perspectives (Steg & Vlek, 2009). In the current contribution, we will follow a social psychological approach, thereby focusing on three potential predictors: intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) life goals, environmental worldviews, and environmental identification.

## 1.2. Extrinsic (versus intrinsic) life goals

Materialism is a value system that places strong emphasis on the acquisition of money, fame, and image as a pathway to happiness and well-being (Dittmar, 2008; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Richins, 2004; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Nowadays, the most common approaches in the materialism literature have focused on values and beliefs (Richins & Dawson, 1992) and on extrinsic (versus intrinsic) life goals and aspirations (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Vansteenkiste, Duriez, & Soenens, 2008). The latter has become the most influential approach to studying materialism in mainstream psychology (Dittmar, 2008). Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) developed the Aspiration Index to assess the importance a person places on extrinsic life goals (e.g., fame, image, and wealth) relatively to intrinsic life goals (e.g., self-development, relationships, community involvement, and health). The higher the relative importance people attach to extrinsic life goals, the stronger is their materialistic orientation.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, correlational studies have explored links between extrinsic life goals (or materialistic values) and environmentally damaging behavior. Richins and Dawson (1992) found, in a sample of US households, that people with a more materialistic orientation were less likely to buy used goods or to use bicycles instead of cars, also showing less ecologically aware behaviors. In a study of UK households, Gatersleben, White, Abrahamse, Jackson, and Uzzell (2009) found that people scoring higher in materialism attached greater importance to possessions associated with high energy use, such as TVs, mobile phones and cars, attached less importance to energy-conserving processes, and were less willing to change a range of ecologically irresponsible behaviors. In samples of US adolescents and adults, Brown and Kasser (2005) found that an intrinsic (versus extrinsic) value orientation related positively to ecologically responsible behavior. Among Hong Kong students and adults, Ku and Zaroff (2014, Studies 1 and 2) found that intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) life goals also predicted participants' self-reported willingness to pay to protect the environment. Studying common social dilemmas among young students in the US, Sheldon and McGregor (2000) explored the association between life goals and harvesting strategies, finding that more extrinsically oriented students would consume limited ecological resources at more unsustainable rates. In a sample of American students, Banerjee and McKeage (1994) found that environmentally friendly consumption was negatively related to materialism. Furthermore, in an analysis comparing 20 wealthy nations, Kasser (2011) found that countries placing a higher priority on the value

of *harmony* (intrinsic) versus the value of *mastery* (extrinsic), tended to have lower CO2 emissions, after controlling for effects of national wealth. A recent meta-analysis (Hurst, Dittmar, Bond, & Kasser, 2014) supported these claims and found significant, medium-sized associations between materialistic values and both environmental attitudes ( $\hat{\rho} = -.28$ ) and behaviors ( $\hat{\rho} = -.32$ ).

The studies described above provide supportive evidence for a link between life goals or values and environmental behavior, but they are all based on one-shot correlational designs, making it impossible to untangle the exact direction of the relation between these two variables. Do intrinsic (versus extrinsic) life-goals lead to an increase in ecologically responsible behavior, or does ecologically responsible behavior lead to a stronger endorsement of intrinsic life-goals? We are aware of just three studies to date that have used an experimental design to address this question: Vansteenkiste et al. (2004) found that female Belgian college students who had been primed with intrinsic reasons to read a text about recycling showed greater subsequent persistence in learning more about recycling (i.e. going to the library or visiting a recycling plant), compared to those who had been primed with extrinsic or both intrinsic and extrinsic goal-contents. Sheldon et al. (2011) found that American students recommended smaller ecological footprints in a scenario task when they were prompted to think of intrinsic values as characteristically American. Finally, in a simulation task among female Chinese students, Ku and Zaroff (2014, Study 3) found that participants primed with intrinsic goals chose to donate more of their virtual earnings to pro-environmental causes, and participants primed with extrinsic goals chose to donate less, compared to a control group.

These three experimental studies provide valuable first evidence for the causal role of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) life goals on pro-environmental concerns. However, they also have several key limitations: First, none of these studies actually measured pro-environmental behavior. Both Sheldon et al. (2011) and Ku and Zaroff (2014) focused on environmental decision-making in imaginary scenarios as dependent measures for their experiments. Although Vansteenkiste et al. (2004) included a behavioral outcome measure, this was focused on *learning* about recycling, and they did not measure recycling behavior itself. Thus, research is still needed to assess the causal link between life goals and everyday environmental behaviors. Second, all three experimental studies relied on student samples. Yet, environmental behaviors are likely to differ significantly between adults and younger generations (Hurst et al., 2014; Sparks, Hinds, Curnock, & Pavey, 2014), because adults usually have more freedom and economic resources to make decisions that affect the environment, whereas students' decision power and economic resources are more constrained. Third, experimental studies such as these are well-suited to showing short-term effects of priming intrinsic or extrinsic life goals at particular moments in time, but the results of such studies may or may not generalize to the longer timescales over which patterns of everyday behavior are developed.

Addressing these limitations requires a different methodological approach. Systematic longitudinal research using a cross-lagged design is better suited to disentangling the ongoing, naturally occurring, reciprocal relations between people's pre-existing (rather than momentarily primed) life goals and their *everyday* environmental behaviors, as these unfold over time. Moreover, because such research can be conducted using survey methods, rather than requiring participants to visit a laboratory, it is possible to reach adult populations, who may have greater environmental impact in their everyday lives (for better or for worse) than student populations. In the research described here, using this naturalistic method further allowed us to compare the predictive role of life goals with that of two other likely predictors of environmental

<sup>1</sup> In a recent meta-analysis, Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, and Kasser (2014) found that measuring materialism through an *absolute* measure (e.g. ratings of the importance of money) or a *relative* measure (e.g. assessing how important materialistic goals are in comparison to a variety of other types of goals, such as personal relationships, community involvement, or spirituality) may lead to different results. They concluded that absolute measures focused on the acquisition of money and possessions alone may not capture the full meaning of materialism. In contrast, they showed that relative goal measures, such as the Aspiration Index, were more strongly related to well-being.

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