



# The humble path to progress: Goal-specific aspirational content predicts goal progress and goal vitality



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## ABSTRACT

While previous research has demonstrated that striving for personal goals connected to intrinsic aspirations benefits psychological well-being, the relation between aspirational content and goal progress has remained unexamined. Using a multilevel modeling (MLM) approach in two longitudinal studies, we examined the relationship between life aspirations at the level of the person and the level of the goal, differentiating the ability of aspirations at both levels to predict later goal progress. We found that students made significantly more progress on (and were more likely to attain) their goals that were more intrinsic in aspirational content. These effects were goal-specific rather than person-driven. Study 2 replicated the findings of study 1 and also revealed an interaction between intrinsic aspirational content and progress in predicting goal-related affect. Specifically, we found that making progress on a goal that was more intrinsic in content led to greater feelings of vitality for that goal, while making progress on a less intrinsic goal did not. These findings highlight the benefits of setting goals connected to intrinsic aspirations (even for generally extrinsically-oriented individuals) and the value of shifting towards MLM approaches for research on goal pursuit.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary motivational researchers have posed the questions: “are some life values more psychologically beneficial than others?” (e.g., Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004) and “what makes for a good goal?” (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). In the present paper, we consider the possibility that people are more amenable to making progress on personal goals that are intrinsic in aspirational content compared to more extrinsic goals.

### 1.1. Life aspirations

An empirical framework has been applied to investigate the impact of values orientation on goal pursuit and well-being. Self-determination theory researchers Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) have contrasted two different types of life values: intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. While intrinsic aspirations, such as community contribution, forming meaningful relationships, and self-growth, are thought to directly satisfy basic psychological needs, extrinsic aspirations, such as fame, affluence, and alluring physical image, rely on external reward, approval, or envy of others and thwart basic psychological need satisfaction.

The pursuit of extrinsic aspirations is not inherently malignant; however, the relative prioritization of extrinsic aspirations over intrinsic aspirations appears to have a negative effect on functioning. Prioritization of extrinsic aspirations has been related to decreased global adjustment, decreased positive affect, increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, and decreased self-actualization, while prioritization of intrinsic aspirations has been related to increased well-being, and decreased symptoms of mental illness (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). The beneficial consequences of prioritization of intrinsic aspirations have been replicated transnationally, including in China (Lekes, Gingras, Philippe, Koestner, & Fang, 2010), Germany (Schmuck, Kasser, & Ryan, 2000), Russia (Ryan et al., 1999), and Korea (Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003). Recently, Kasser et al. (2014) demonstrated in two longitudinal studies that increased prioritization of intrinsic relative to financial success aspirations is related to enhanced well-being over time (study 1 and study 2), and that this change in well-being is mediated by greater satisfaction of basic psychological needs (study 2).

Research on intrinsic aspirations has also led to revealing findings about normative changes in values in certain cultural, institutional, and environmental milieus. For example, in most community and university samples in North America individuals have been found to prioritize intrinsic aspirations over extrinsic aspirations, and become more intrinsic in their orientation with age (Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). However, Sheldon and Krieger (2004) found that first year law students shifted from prioritization of intrinsic aspirations to extrinsic aspirations over the year. Furthermore, as law students' oriented towards extrinsic aspirations, their well-being plunged.

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Sheldon and McGregor (2000) reviewed similarities between orientation to extrinsic values and other personality variables, such as external perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Connell, 1989), which might also represent deviation from “natural interests or developmental trends within themselves” (p. 286). However, Sheldon and MacGregor noted that “[orientation to extrinsic aspirations] is different from these constructs in that it refers to enduring personal values, which may lead individuals to adopt motives and goals which are chronically unsatisfying of their psychological needs”. This leads to an important question: how do life aspirations influence the kinds of personal goals we set? Time-framed personal goals represent a lower tier on the motivational hierarchy, and may be influenced by higher order life aspirations.

### 1.2. Aspirational content and personal goal pursuit

Personal goals specify desired end states that one hopes to achieve, and can add structure and meaning to individuals' lives (Cantor et al., 1991). Goals direct attention away from distracting, irrelevant activities towards goal-related activities (Locke & Latham, 2002). Many personal goals are time-framed. For example, students may set goals for the new semester, just as many working adults set goals for the New Year. Making progress on one's goals has been tied to a number of beneficial life outcomes, including increased well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) and job satisfaction (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005). In a meta-analysis, Koestner, Lekes, Powers, and Chicoine (2002) found a highly significant positive overall effect for the relationship between goal progress and well-being. People tend to experience significantly greater positive affect, and significantly less negative affect over time as they make progress on their goals.

Sheldon and colleagues have expanded research on intrinsic and extrinsic life aspirations to personal goal pursuit (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998; Sheldon et al., 2004). Sheldon and Kasser (1995) proposed goal coherence, the extent to which the content of personal goals connects to intrinsic aspirations, as a possible indicator of personality integration. They found that the extent to which personal goals were connected to intrinsic aspirations was positively related to daily well-being (vitality, positive affect, and meaningfulness of activities), as well as trait measures of self-actualization, openness, cognitive empathy, and self-esteem. In contrast, the extent to which personal goals were connected to extrinsic aspirations was only related to the daily number of “distracting” activities reported by participants.

In two longitudinal studies, Sheldon et al., 2004 asked university students to generate several personal goals that they would be pursuing over the semester (study 2) or over their first post-graduation year (study 3) and rate the extent to which each goal connected to three intrinsic (meaningful relationships, personal growth, and societal contribution) and three extrinsic possible futures (financial success, popularity and fame, attractive physical image). From these ratings, a relative extrinsic content score was computed for each goal, and a person-level score was computed across the goals. In both studies, person-level analyses revealed that mean relative extrinsic content across goals was associated with decreased well-being over time.

Although the results of Sheldon et al.'s (2004) longitudinal investigations (studies 2 and 3) are compelling, one disadvantage is that these studies used between-person analyses in order to investigate outcomes related to pursuing goals intrinsic relative to extrinsic in content. In other words, relative intrinsic content was aggregated across all personal goals (eight goals for study 2; five goals for study 3) for each person, rendering it an individual differences measure rather than a goal-specific measure. While this approach can address the question: “what are the outcomes associated with individual differences in general tendencies to select and pursue goals that are more intrinsic vs. extrinsic in nature?”, it does not address the question “what are the goal-specific outcomes of a person pursuing a goal that is relatively more intrinsic than their other goals vs. more extrinsic than their

other goals?” Furthermore, while there is evidence for a relationship between aspirational content across goals and psychological well-being, the relationship between aspirational content and goal progress has not been explored.

Researchers have suggested that goals offering natural incentives may be less effortful to pursue. Cantor and Blanton (1996) contrast the “strategic pursuit” of personal goals with the “spontaneous pursuit” of natural incentives. Strategic pursuit requires more cognitive resources for planning and commitment, while spontaneous pursuit operates more automatically. The authors suggest that goals with natural incentives may aid spontaneous goal pursuit as incremental progress is made and rewarded with these incentives: “Natural incentives are biologically based motivations, grounded in each individual's need for procreation and survival, that are associated with pleasant affective experiences. Thus, cues that signal the possibility of experiencing natural incentives cause an emotional charge or ‘energization’. This anticipatory state causes people to seek the ‘kick’ that accompanies natural incentives” (p.339).

We propose that goals connected to intrinsic aspirations will be more likely to meet success as these goals offer natural incentives. Arguably, goals that are intrinsic in content (such as building close relationships and giving back to others) are more aligned with natural incentives compared to goals that are extrinsic in content (e.g., appearing more attractive; accumulating material goods). Many extrinsic goals are only rewarding because of the symbolic or cognitive meaning placed on the extrinsic attainment. For example, money is only rewarding in that shelter, clothing, status symbols, toys, people, and persuasion can be bought with it. It would have no value to its proprietor if that proprietor was the sole inhabitant on a deserted island. In contrast, striving for close relationships may lead to immediate benefits of greater social connectedness and intimate exchanges, which are valuable benefits even when removed from the context of modern North American society.

#### 1.2.1. Vitality

Subjective vitality is the feeling that one is alive and energized, and is proposed to reflect organismic wellness (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Subjective vitality is not simply a reflection of caloric energy available to metabolize, but rather a *feeling* that energy is available, with both psychological and physical factors influencing self-reports of vitality (Thayer, 1996; Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Subjective vitality has been found to be related to self-actualization, physical self-efficacy, physical health and well-being, while it has been negatively correlated with anxiety and depression (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Additionally, activities in which one feels volitionally engaged and agentic catalyze feelings of vitality, while those in which one feels under the control of the environment decrease subjective vitality. For example, in a group of patients engaging in a treatment program for morbid obesity, those who were high in internal reasons (contrasted with external reasons) for following treatment guidelines reported significantly greater subjective vitality, compared to those who were low in internal reasons (Ryan & Frederick, 1997).

Just as people can feel alive and vital when pursuing certain activities, we expected that vitality could also be experienced in the context of goal pursuit. For example, it is likely that a person would feel more vital when pursuing a goal that helps them spend more time with their spouse than when pursuing a goal that helps them earn more money. Specifically, we expected that goals connected to relatively more intrinsic aspirations would lead people to feel more vital. Additionally, research has demonstrated the affective and well-being benefits of accomplishing personal goals (e.g. Koestner et al., 2002), and it may be the case that progress on *certain* goals leads to especially beneficial affective consequences. We expect greater vitality when goals related to intrinsic aspirations (but not those related to extrinsic aspirations) are attained. We examine goal vitality in study 2.

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