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Parental goal promotion and college students' self-esteem level and contingency: The mediating role of need satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the antecedent role of perceived parental goal promotion for students' self-esteem level and contingency. Additionally, we examined the mediating role of experienced need satisfaction. Using three-wave longitudinal data in a sample of 494 college students (mean age at Time 1 = 18.41 years, 84% female), we found that intrinsic parental goal promotion at baseline directly and positively predicted students' initial self-esteem level. Further, intrinsic parental goal promotion indirectly predicted both students' initial self-esteem level (positive effect) and initial self-esteem contingency (negative effect) via need satisfaction. Extrinsic goal promotion only directly and positively predicted students' initial self-esteem contingency. Limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Based on a heterogeneous view of self-esteem, scholars have argued that aspects beyond self-esteem level (i.e., whether self-esteem is high or low) need to be considered in predicting behavior and adjustment (Heppner & Kernis, 2011). In particular, the concept of self-esteem contingency has recently received much attention. Self-esteem contingency can be defined as the global or domain-specific tendency to let one's self-esteem depend on external or internal conditions: To perceive themselves as good and worthy, individuals with high self-esteem contingency need to fulfill certain criteria. Such contingent functioning leads to self-esteem boosts when self-related standards are reached, but it also leads to self-esteem drops when these standards are not met. Moreover, because failure with regard to self-related goals is closely tied to one's worth as a person, such failure will not be easily dismissed (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Accordingly, researchers have demonstrated that higher self-esteem contingency is associated with serious costs for one's mental and physical health (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004; Johnson, 2011).

Research has demonstrated that self-esteem contingency and self-esteem level refer to two distinct aspects of self-esteem which

are moderately negatively correlated (e.g., Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel, & Biesheuvel, 2010; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Meier, Orth, Denissen, & Kühnel, 2011). This moderate negative association suggests that individuals with lower self-esteem levels are generally more prone to self-esteem contingency. This pattern fits with empirical findings showing that self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency have opposite associations with adjustment, with self-esteem level being negatively related and self-esteem contingency being positively related to maladjustment (Bos et al., 2010; Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

As both self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency have been found to predict individuals' well-being, it is important to identify their antecedents to inform prevention and intervention efforts. Parental antecedents seem particularly important, as parents are known to be particularly influential with regard to their children's development in general (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Steinberg, 2001) and the development of children's self-esteem in particular (e.g., Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996). Although research on parenting antecedents of self-esteem contingency is still scarce (see Wouters, Doumen, Germeijs, Colpin, & Verschueren, 2013 for an exception), researchers have contended that parents may affect their children's self-esteem contingency through the criteria they use to assess a person's worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). As such, we argue that the extent to which students perceive their parents as emphasizing or valuing certain goals will affect their self-esteem contingency, and relatedly, their self-esteem level. Thus, we extended previous research by examining perceived parental goal promotion as a key antecedent of first-year college students' self-esteem level and contingency.

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Goal content theory (GCT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic goals. The goals of financial success, social recognition, and physical attractiveness, for instance, are considered extrinsic goals because individuals who endorse these goals primarily aim at impressing others through acquiring external indicators of worth (referring to a more outward orientation). In contrast, intrinsic goals, such as self-development, community contribution, and affiliation, are considered inherently satisfying to pursue with a focus on developing one's personal interests and potentials (referring to a more inward orientation) (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007; Kasser, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

Research has shown that individuals' intrinsic goal pursuits relative to their extrinsic goal pursuits lead to higher levels of well-being such as an increased self-esteem level (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Similarly, we expected parental promotion of intrinsic goals to lead to an enhanced focus on self-actualization and, hence, more well-being. In the present study, we assessed self-esteem level and contingency longitudinally to allow for examining the influence of parental goal promotion on both initial level and rates of change of both self-esteem measures. With respect to the initial level of both self-esteem measures, we expected a positive effect of intrinsic goal promotion on students' self-esteem level and a negative effect on self-esteem contingency. With respect to growth, we hypothesized that a stronger promotion of intrinsic goals would be positively associated with growth in self-esteem level, but negatively associated with growth in self-esteem contingency. Extrinsic parental goal promotion, on the other hand, should make students more preoccupied with impressing others, social comparisons, and reaching external standards (Duriez et al., 2007; Kasser, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). This outward orientation is expected to result in a need to prove oneself, leading to a negative effect on students' initial self-esteem level and a positive effect on their initial level of self-esteem contingency. A stronger promotion of extrinsic goals was also hypothesized to relate negatively to students' growth in self-esteem level and positively to their growth in self-esteem contingency.

The second study aim was to examine a mechanism through which parental goal promotion would shape college students' self-esteem level and contingency. In the present study, we focused on need satisfaction as a possible mediator. Scholars have argued that focusing on intrinsic goals with an inherent emphasis on self-growth and interpersonal relations is likely to satisfy individuals' basic psychological needs (i.e., their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness), whereas focusing too much on extrinsic goals with the associated 'having orientation' may thwart these needs or may be unrelated to need satisfaction (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Similar predictions may be formulated with regard to parental goal promotion in the current study. Furthermore, Deci and Ryan (1995) hypothesized, based on self-determination theory, that self-esteem level would be impaired when individuals' basic psychological needs are not satisfied. Accordingly, previous research has shown a positive relation between need satisfaction and self-esteem level (Deci et al., 2001). Further, self-esteem contingency is likely to increase when individuals' basic psychological needs are not satisfied, as thwarting of inner needs may promote individuals to seek external sources of self-worth, whereas individuals whose basic needs are satisfied may not need constant validation of their self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Thus, promotion of intrinsic goals should lead to more satisfied basic psychological needs which may, in turn, lead to a higher self-esteem level and less self-esteem contingency. Promotion of extrinsic goals, on the other hand, should lead to less satisfied basic psychological needs which will, in turn, lead to a lower self-esteem level and more self-esteem contingency. In sum, we hypothesized that the extent to which

students' basic psychological needs are satisfied will explain the link between intrinsic and extrinsic parental goal promotion, on the one hand, and self-esteem level and contingency, on the other.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A longitudinal sample of freshman psychology students was recruited at a large university in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Data were collected at three measurement waves with a three-month interval resulting in a total time span of 6 months; 500 students agreed to participate. We deleted six cases because they were older than 30 or did not have an age indication. Of the final sample of 494 students, 455 students participated at Time 1 (T1), 447 students participated at Time 2 (T2), and 418 students participated at Time 3 (T3). Mean age at T1 was 18.41 years ($SD = 1.43$; range 17–29). Most participants (84%) were female. For the present set of variables, only 9.01% of the data at the scale level was missing in the final sample. Based on Little's (1988) Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) test, yielding a normed chi square of 1.32 which suggested that drop-out occurred completely at random, we used the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedure.

2.2. Measures

All questionnaires were administered in Dutch and all items were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*).

At T1, students filled out the 18-item Parental Goal Promotion Questionnaire (Duriez et al., 2007), assessing the degree to which parents are perceived to promote extrinsic or intrinsic goals. The extrinsic goals of financial success ('My parents find it important that I'm financially successful in my life'), social recognition ('My parents find it important that I am popular'), and physical attractiveness ('My parents find it important that I'm physically attractive and appealing for others'), and the intrinsic goals of growth ('My parents find it important that I develop my talents'), community contribution ('My parents place high importance on helping other people in need'), and affiliation ('My parents find it important that I develop close relationships with a few friends') were assessed (three items each). Cronbach's alpha was .84 for perceived intrinsic goal promotion and .85 for perceived extrinsic goal promotion. Additionally, we measured the extent to which students' basic psychological needs are satisfied at T1 with the 9-item Need Satisfaction Scale (Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Duriez, 2009). Satisfaction of the basic needs of autonomy ('I feel that my choices are based on my true interests and values'), competence ('I feel that I can successfully complete difficult tasks and projects'), and relatedness ('I feel a sense of contact with people who care for me, and whom I care for') were assessed. Cronbach's alpha for need satisfaction was .83.

At T1, T2, and T3, self-esteem level was measured with a Dutch version of the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; Van der Linden, Dijkman, & Roeders, 1983) and self-esteem contingency with a Dutch version of the 15-item Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Paradise & Kernis, 1999; Soenens & Duriez, 2012). Sample items were 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself (self-esteem level)' and 'A big determinant of how much I like myself is how well I perform up to the standards that I have set for myself (self-esteem contingency)'. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .92 to .93 for self-esteem level and from .81 to .83 for self-esteem contingency.

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