



The path taken: Consequences of attaining intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations in post-college life

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ABSTRACT

Life goals, or aspirations, organize and direct behavior over extended periods of time. The current study, guided by self-determination theory, examined the consequences of pursuing and attaining aspirations over a 1-year period in a post-college sample. Results indicated that placing importance on either intrinsic or extrinsic aspirations related positively to attainment of those goals. Yet, whereas attainment of intrinsic aspirations related positively to psychological health, attainment of extrinsic aspirations did not; indeed, attainment of extrinsic aspirations related positively to indicators of ill-being. Also as predicted, the association between change in attainment of intrinsic aspirations and change in psychological health was mediated by change in the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Discussion focuses on the idea that not all goal attainment is beneficial; rather, attainment of aspirations with different contents relates differentially to psychological health.

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1. Introduction

When students graduate from college they face the developmental challenges of establishing a career path, an extra-familial network of relationships, and, especially in modern cultures, an identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2003). This critical developmental juncture offers researchers an opportunity to examine a natural period of important change by studying how the pursuit and attainment of different types of life goals, or aspirations, relate to psychological health.

In this study, we examined the consequences of focusing on one of two types of life goals; namely, whether young adults who had recently graduated from college chose to emphasize intrinsic or extrinsic aspirations of their life's path (Kasser & Ryan, 1996, 2001). At 1 and 2 years post-college, young adults reported how much importance they placed on extrinsic aspirations (*viz.*, money, fame, and image) and intrinsic aspirations (*viz.*, personal growth, close relationships, community involvement, and physical health); the degree to which they had attained those aspirations; the level of satisfaction they experienced for their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and a variety of well-being and ill-being outcomes. In line with a number of modern expectancy-value theories (for a review, see Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), we expected that placing importance on particular goals at Time 1 would relate positively to attainment of those goals at Time 2. However, unique to self-determination theory (SDT; Deci

& Ryan, 2000; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, *in press*; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we suggested that attainment of intrinsic aspirations at Time 2, because it is associated with basic psychological need satisfaction, would relate positively to psychological health, but that attainment of extrinsic aspirations at Time 2, because it is not associated with basic psychological need satisfaction, would be unrelated, or even negatively related, to psychological health. To explicate these hypotheses, we begin with a review of the literature on aspirations and psychological health.

1.1. The pursuit of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations

In recent years, a growing body of research has suggested that not all aspirations are equally beneficial for psychological health and social functioning. This research began with studies by Kasser and Ryan (1993) showing that people who strongly valued financial success relative to personal growth, close relationships, and community involvement reported poorer psychological health, suggesting a potential 'dark side to the American dream.' Subsequently, Kasser and Ryan (1996) examined seven life goals—accumulation of wealth and material possessions, social recognition and fame, being physically attractive and having an appealing image, personal growth and development, meaningful affiliation and close relationships, generativity and community involvement, and being physically healthy—and proposed that those aspirations were likely to fall into two general categories. As expected, the researchers found that money, fame, and image loaded on one factor, which they labeled *extrinsic*, whereas personal growth, close relationships, community involvement, and physical health loaded

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on another factor, which they labeled *intrinsic*. The *intrinsic* factor was so labeled because its goals are expressive of humans' inherent growth tendency and are conducive to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the other factor was labeled *extrinsic* because its goals typically are pursued as a means to some separable outcome and are not directly linked to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).¹

Kasser and Ryan (1996) reported that the importance to individuals of pursuing intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations related positively to various indicators of well-being, including positive affect, vitality, and self-actualization, and related negatively to various indicators of ill-being, including depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms. Similar results have been found in diverse countries and with working adults as well as college students (e.g., Ryan et al., 1999; Schmuck, Kasser, & Ryan, 2000; Vans-teenkiste et al., 2007).

1.2. The relation of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations to need satisfaction

Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, and Deci (1996) suggested that the key difference between intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations, and the reason that the two groups of aspirations are differentially related to psychological health, is the degree to which those goals are linked to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are considered by SDT to be the cornerstones of psychological health. The need for autonomy refers to a sense of choice and volition in the regulation of behavior; the need for competence refers to a sense of effective interaction with the environment; and the need for relatedness concerns feeling connected to, and cared about by, important others. More specifically, SDT theorizes that the relations of the two types of aspirations to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs involves two components: first, that satisfaction of the basic psychological needs across development will promote higher importance of intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) aspirations; second, that the pursuit and attainment of intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) aspirations at any given time will facilitate satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and, in turn, will promote psychological health.

Two studies have provided indirect evidence for the first part of this postulate, namely that basic psychological need satisfaction is associated with the development of *valuing* intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) aspirations and with adjustment. Kasser, Ryan, Zax, and Sameroff (1995) studied a community-based sample of 18-year olds and their mothers. Using both self-reports and structured interviews to assess mothers' provision of need support to their children, Kasser et al. found that mothers' support for autonomy and relatedness related positively to their teenagers' valuing intrinsic aspirations (relative to financial success). Similarly, Williams, Cox, Hedberg, and Deci (2000) found that high school students who reported that their parents were autonomy supportive (and thus promoted basic psychological need satisfaction) placed more importance on intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations and were less likely to engage in risky health behaviors, including use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana.

Much more research has addressed the second part of this postulate, namely that the pursuit and attainment of intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) aspirations will facilitate basic psychological need

satisfaction and promote psychological health. Most of the studies that have examined those relations, however, have focused on the association between psychological health and the *pursuit* or *valuing* of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations (Kasser, 2002), with very few having focused on the *attainment* of those aspirations. The primary focus of the current study is on aspiration attainment.

1.3. The attainment of aspirations and psychological health

Most contemporary goal theorists suggest that people feel good when they attain their goals (Emmons, 1986) and that goal attainment is beneficial to psychological health (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Locke & Latham, 1990). However, SDT argues that it is primarily when people attain intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) goals that they will experience more well-being and less ill-being because it is only attainment of intrinsic goals that is likely to provide satisfaction of their basic psychological needs. In short, to the extent that goal attainment does not provide basic psychological need satisfaction, it is unlikely to yield long-term psychological health benefits and may cause some decrements.

A few studies have provided initial support for the SDT position that not all goal attainment is beneficial. Kasser and Ryan (2001) examined the relation of attainment of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations to various mental health outcomes within two samples of college students. In their first sample, Kasser and Ryan found that attainment of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations related positively to psychological health (*viz.*, self-actualization, vitality, self-esteem, and the reverse of depression and anxiety). Moreover, attainment of extrinsic aspirations did not relate to psychological health. Specifically, the adjustment of people who were high in attainment of extrinsic aspirations but low in attainment of intrinsic aspirations was no better than that of people who were low in attainment of both extrinsic and intrinsic aspirations. In a second sample, Kasser and Ryan reported similar results for the quality of interpersonal relationships. Together, these results provide initial evidence that attainment of intrinsic, but not extrinsic, aspirations relates positively to psychological health and social functioning.

Ryan et al. (1999) reported a cross-sectional study of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations with Russian and U.S. college students. In both samples they showed that, whereas attainment of intrinsic aspirations related positively to psychological health, even after accounting for attainment of extrinsic aspirations, the converse was not true. Attainment of extrinsic aspirations did not add significant variance to the prediction of psychological health once attainment of intrinsic aspirations was considered.

Sheldon and Kasser (1998) reported that students' overall progress toward goal attainment during a semester was beneficial for their psychological health. However, this finding was moderated by whether the progress was instrumental for intrinsic or extrinsic *possible futures*. Specifically, when goal attainment was seen as instrumental for intrinsic possible futures it related positively to psychological health (*viz.*, life satisfaction, positive affect, and the reverse of depression and negative affect), but when goal attainment was instrumental for extrinsic possible futures it was unrelated to psychological health.

In sum, the findings from those studies suggesting differential relations of attainment of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations to psychological health qualify the general control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981), expectancy-value theory (e.g., Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Vroom, 1964), goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) views, which suggest that attainment of (valued) goals is beneficial for psychological health. The studies reviewed above, however, were limited by their using an index of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspiration attainment; by their using a psychological health composite, rather

¹ It is important to note that the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations are not isomorphic with the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The former refer to life goals that organize and direct behavior over time, whereas the latter refer to the motivation for pursuing a particular goal-directed behavior. Indeed, the constructs of aspirations and motivations have been distinguished both theoretically (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and empirically (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004).

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