Finding Happiness and Meaning: What the Research Tells Us

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University of Rochester
Self-Determination Theory: Areas of Empirical Inquiry

**Basic:**

**Intrinsic Motivation:** Cognitive Evaluation Theory

**Internalization:** Organismic Integration Theory

**Well Being:** Basic Need Theory and Hedonic versus Eudaimonic Processes

**Culture and Gender:** Universal Needs versus Culturally Specific or Gender Specific Motives

**Materialism and other Extrinsic Life Goals:** Acquisition and Effects

**Energy and Vitality:** Determinants and relations to health

**Mindfulness:** Its relations to self-regulation and well-being

**Applied:**

**Psychotherapy:** Treatment Motivation and Maintenance and Transfer of Gains

**Education:** Motivational Dynamics behind interest and performance

**Health Care:** Adherence and Compliance to medical regimens

**Sport and Exercise Motivation**

**Organizational Behavior and Performance:** Managerial Climate

**Religious Internalization and Motivation**

**Environmental Footprints and Consumer Behaviors**

**Virtual Environments and Video Games**
How should one live?

What constitutes a good life?  
What makes people happy?
On the good and happiness: to judge from their lives, most people, i.e., the most vulgar, seem to suppose it to be pleasure; that is why they favor the life of consumption.

(Aristotle, NE, pp. 97-98)
Happy: Those who “have cultivated their character and mind, ... and kept the acquisition of external goods within moderate limits.”

Unhappy: Those who: “have managed to acquire more external goods than they can possibly use, and are lacking goods of the soul”
But we also have modern philosophers who disagree........
Cultural Messages

- One can buy happiness
- People are successful to the extent they have money, possessions, and the right image
- If you don’t become rich or famous, you are a “loser”
But whose right?:
Aristotle vs. Trump
Researching the American Dream

We began by asking people about their life goals, for example:

“How important is being financial successful?”
“How important is giving to your community?” etc.

Will people who focus on certain goals be happier?
First Foray (1993): Money and Materialism

How important is money?
How important are relationships, growth, community?
Found that those who place a high value on money were more unhappy
“Dark Side of the American Dream”

(Kasser & Ryan, 1993)
Two Important Types of Life Goals

Extrinsic Life Goals

• Financial Success, $$$$
• Social Recognition (Fame)
• Physically Attractive

Intrinsic Life Goals

• Meaningful Relationships
• Community Contributions
• Personal Growth
## Relations of the Importance of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals to Well-Being College Students (n=192)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Goal Importance</th>
<th>Intrinsic</th>
<th>Extrinsic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-actualization</td>
<td>0.59**</td>
<td>-0.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitality</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Symptoms</td>
<td>-0.35*</td>
<td>0.43*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Relations of Intrinsic & Extrinsic Goal Importance to Well-Being (adult sample)

Scores control for overall goal importance, entered at step 1 yielding standardized regression coefficient.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intrinsic</th>
<th>Extrinsic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Actualization</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>-.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitality</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>-.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Symptoms</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
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*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01
Differences Between Business Students and Pre-Teachers on Life Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Business Students</th>
<th>School Teachers</th>
<th>t</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic values</td>
<td>5.15 (0.46)</td>
<td>5.48 (0.28)</td>
<td>-13.78***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic Values</td>
<td>4.01 (0.87)</td>
<td>2.20 (0.69)</td>
<td>18.32***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .001
Correlations Between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals and Wellness Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Well-Being</th>
<th>Substance Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic values</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>-.31***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic Values</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>.36***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p < .001
Correlations of Relative Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Goal Importance with Well-Being in Russia and the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Russia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Actualization</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of depression</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U. S.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.25**</td>
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*Note.** **p < .01. Life goal ratings are calculated so that higher numbers reflect a more intrinsic vs. extrinsic emphasis.*
15 Country Study
Iceland 2007

Economic crash, beyond the scope of worldwide recession

Expected and found
A greater focus on materialism (64%); but some became less materialistic

Those who became more materialistic became more unhappy; reverse also true
The pattern of findings appears to be universal....

Russian, German, Korean, Israeli, Belgian, British, Nigerian, .....even Canadian samples

Teenagers, Parents, Adult Workers, Retired Workers, all SES levels

Business, Education, Sport, Law and Medical Students
“The pattern of change best fits a model of cultural change toward extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals that may have negatively impacted youth mental health.”

(Twenge, J.M., et al., 2010, CPR)
Their conclusion.....

“Over time, American culture has increasingly shifted toward an environment in which more and more young people experience poor mental health and psychopathology, possibly due to an increased focus on money, appearance, and status rather than on community and close relationships.”
But Doesn’t *Attaining* Extrinsic Goals Produce Happiness?
Source: Happiness data from General Social Surveys, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. Income data from Bureau of the Census (1975) and Economic Indicators.
GDP vs. GPI
Well-Being of Four Groups Differing in Reported Attainment of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals

From Kasser & Ryan, 2001
"The belief that high income is associated with good mood is widespread but mostly illusory,"

Those with higher incomes are “barely happier than others…, tend to be more tense, and do not spend more time in particularly enjoyable activities."
Be careful what you wish for

Two Year Longitudinal Study of early career adults

Assessed Intrinsic and Extrinsic Life Goals at Baseline, and Well-being

Two years later we found:

--People tended to achieve their valued goals

--progress at intrinsic goals led to greater wellness and lower distress and ill being

--no positive relation between extrinsic goal attainments and wellness; more signs of distress and ill being

Niemiec, Ryan & Deci, 2009
Relations between Goals, Attainment & Changes in Well-Being over a One Year Period (N=147)

Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci (2009)

Diagram showing the relationships between Intrinsic Aspirations, Extrinsic Aspirations, Time 1 Importance, Time 2 Attainment, and Time 2 Psychological Health with coefficients indicated for each relationship.
Predicting Psychological Health from the Attainment of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals in an Older Adult sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal attainment</th>
<th>Well-being</th>
<th>Ego-Integrity</th>
<th>Despair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic goal attainment</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic goal attainment</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.26**</td>
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Note: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001. N=202
Predicting Psychological Health and Death Attitudes from Attainment of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals in Older Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal attainment</th>
<th>Well-being</th>
<th>Depressive Symptoms</th>
<th>Ego-Integrity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic goal attainment</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>-.31***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic goal attainment</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>-.16*</td>
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<tr>
<th>Goal attainment</th>
<th>Despair</th>
<th>Death Acceptance</th>
<th>Death Anxiety</th>
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Controls for demographics
Why Do Extrinsic Goals Tend To Produce These Negative Outcomes?

- Greater stress
- Social Comparisons
- The “desire gap”
- Burden of debt
- Burdens of possessions
- Crowding out satisfying and important activities
- Relationship and family costs
- Time deprivation
Two-Week Diary Study of Spending
(tracked every purchase of $5 or more, adult working sample)

- Wealthier people spent more
- Materialists spent more
- Increase in NA after purchases
- No change in PA
- The effect was attributable primarily to materialists
How People Get Stuck on Extrinsic Goals

- Development of insecurity
- Parental and Peer Modeling
- Exposure to materialist culture
Media Exposure

• 4-6 hours per day of TV for children
• Over 60 hours/week with media
• Most will spend over 5 years in front of TV by age 50
• Exposed to 3000 ads per day
• Both explicit and embedded materialistic messages
• People who watch more TV become more materialistic
Marketing to Kids

“Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you’re a loser.... Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them that they’ll be a dork if they don’t, you’ve got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities, and it’s very easy to do with kids because they’re the most emotionally vulnerable”

- Advertising CEO (Harris, 1989).
Our young people are listening:

8 in 10 “gen nexters” say “getting rich” is the most important, or second most important life goal for their peer group.

“Getting famous” also among the very top goals.

More would like to be a celebrity assistant than a Harvard professor or a federal judge.

(Pew Research Center, Jan. 2007)
OK, but what should one do?
Remember… There are other life goals

**Extrinsic Life Goals**
- Financial Success
- Social Recognition (Fame)
- Physically Attractive

**Intrinsic Life Goals**
- Personal Growth
- Meaningful Relationships
- Community Contributions
Personal Growth

- Meaningful vocations and avocations
- Challenges, novelty, learning
- Pursuing interests and values
Relationships

- Universally rated as the most important value
- Most important aspect of life satisfaction
- Often neglected aspect of school, work climates
Community/Generativity

Why Giving is Rewarding

e.g., Volunteering
  G2
  Blood Donations
  paid vs. unpaid
  Daily acts of helping
Effects of Motivation for Helping on Wellbeing for Both Helper and Recipient
Nature: Happiness for Free

Increased Vitality,

Increased Mindfulness

More Positive Toward Others

attitudes

generosity
The path to Nature: An SUV?

- Explorer
- Navigator
- Land Cruiser
- Tundra
- Bronco
- Voyager
- Safari
- Scout
- Highlander
- Mountaineer
- Sequoia
- Pathfinder
- Range Rover
- Overland
- Wrangler
- Trailblazer
- Expedition
- Cherokee
Ecological Footprint

- EF = Number of acres people use to support their lifestyle
- Transportation, food, housing, purchases
- Ideally around 5 acres; but Americans use around 30
- Higher materialism, higher Ecological Footprint
There are many reasons besides happiness for reevaluating our materialistic lifestyles...
About meaning

Clinical realities

- What really matters
- Time as the only non-renewable resource
- Death experiment
- This moment, what to do with it?

the ways in which less is more
It remains true…

The best things in life (those that make us happy) are free

At least that is what the data shows…
When it comes to knowing what foster happiness, Aristotle may trump Trump.
www.selfdeterminationtheory.org