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Personal Goals as Windows to Well-Being

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Goals are central to an understanding of human behavior because they energize action and provide meaning, direction, and purpose to life activities. Goals help explain the "whys" of action—that is, what people are trying to accomplish. Nearly all behavior has a purpose, whether it's washing dishes, having fun with friends, looking for a job, or planning a vacation. Goals explain and make sense of our actions by providing reasons for their occurrence. Whatever our behavior, if someone asks, "What are you doing?" we typically respond by describing the purpose of our actions in terms of a desired outcome (i.e., achieving a goal). Goals also make our lives coherent by establishing connections between specific short-term and more general long-term purposes and desires. For example, if you are a college student reading this book for a class on positive psychology, your specific purpose is to understand the material in this chapter. This specific goal is probably part of a larger goal of doing well in the class; which is a sub-goal of meeting the requirements to graduate from college; which relates to the more general goal of getting a good job; which may relate to an even more encompassing goal of having a satisfying life. In short, our behavior during a day, a week, a year, or a lifetime would not make much sense without an understanding of the goals we are striving to achieve.

Robert Emmons (2003) describes personal goals as “the well-springs of a positive life” (p. 105). In other words, the goals we pursue are intimately connected to our happiness and well-being. The importance of goals is clearly evident in cases where people do not have reasonably clear, personally meaningful, and attainable goals. Both goal conflict and unrealistic goals have consistently been linked to lower well-being and higher distress (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Emmons, 1999b; Karolyi, 1999; Lent, 2004). For example, Emmons and King (1988) found that conflict and ambivalence about personal goals were related to higher levels of negative affect, depressed mood, neuroticism, and physical illness. Even though people spent a good deal of time ruminating about their conflicting goals, this did not lead to action aimed at resolution. Instead, conflict tended to immobilize action and was associated with decreased subjective well-being (SWB).

A further example of the relation between goals and personal distress is shown in the link between unrealistic standards for self-evaluation and clinical depression. Perfectionists, for example, are at higher risk for both depression and suicide because of the self-blame, low self-worth, and chronic sense of failure that result from their inability to meet unrealistic expectations (Baumeister, 1990; Blatt, 1995; Karolyi, 1999). These expectations may be self-imposed through a belief that one must be flawless, or socially imposed through a belief that significant others have expectations and demands that are difficult or impossible to achieve. The chronic inability to satisfy individual standards for self-approval and to meet the perceived expectations of others to gain social approval can cause severe distress. Prolonged distress may lead to what Baumeister (1990) called the “escape from self”—namely, suicide.

On the positive side, attaining personally significant goals, pursuing meaningful aspirations, and involving oneself in valued activities all contribute to enhanced happiness and well-being (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Emmons, 1999b; Emmons & King, 1988; Lent, 2004). Personal goals play a pivotal role in individual well-being because they are the basis for activities that bring happiness and meaning to life. Engagement in meaningful life tasks makes a significant and independent contribution to well-being. For example, in a study of over 600 older adults, involvement in social and community activities was related to higher levels of life satisfaction, even after controlling for personal resources such as health, social support, congeniality, and prior levels of satisfaction (Harlow & Cantor, 1996). In other words, participation in social activities increased well-being above and beyond the effects of personal resources.

GOALS CONNECT “HAVING” AND “DOING”

In addition to their independent contribution, goals may also determine the extent to which personal resources influence well-being. Cantor and Sanderson (1999) note that goals help connect the “having” side to the “doing” side of life (see also Cantor, 1990). This traditional distinction (first made by personality theorist Gordon Allport in 1937) captures the importance of “having” personal resources such as social skills, an optimistic attitude, and supportive friends, as well as the importance of “doing,” in the form of developing meaningful goals and pursuing personally significant life activities. That is,
both resources (material and personal) and commitment to goals have an important connection to well-being. This connection is exemplified in a study of resources and personal strivings among college students (Diener & Fujita, 1995).

These researchers found that the effect of resources on well-being depended on their congruence with personal goals. Resources measured in the study included skills and abilities (like intelligence and social skills), personal traits (being energetic and outgoing), social support (close ties with family members and friends), and material resources (money and possessions). Goals were assessed through students' descriptions of 15 personal strivings (defined as “the things they were typically trying to do in their everyday behavior”) (Diener & Fujita, p. 929). Students rated the relevance of each resource to each personal striving, and also provided ratings on measures of global SWB and experience-sampling measures of daily mood. The critical factor determining the effects of resources on SWB was the degree of congruence between resources and personal strivings. Having resources that facilitated achieving personal goals was related to higher SWB, while a lack of goal-related resources was associated with relatively lower levels of well-being. That is, it did not matter how many resources a student had. What mattered was whether those resources supported the goals they were trying to accomplish.

Diener and Fujita describe two case studies to make this goal–resource relationship concrete. One young woman in the study had strong personal resources in the area of intelligence and self-discipline for work. However, she rated these resources as largely unrelated to her goals. She perceived self-confidence and support from family members and friends as much more relevant. Unfortunately, she was not strong in these areas. In short, her personal resources did not match and support her personal goals. Her level of well-being was extremely low—three standard deviations below the mean for students in the study. A second woman in the study had strong resources in the area of support from friends and family members, and rated these resources as highly relevant to her goals. She was low in athleticism and money, but perceived these resources as unrelated to her goals. The good alignment of resources and goals for this young woman was associated with a very high level of well-being. Her level of SWB was one standard deviation above the sample mean.

The recent surge of interest in goal-related concepts within psychology is, in large measure, a result of their potential to explain how “having” and “doing” co-determine life outcomes and therefore well-being. As soon as we ask why “having” a particular personal resource or life advantage leads to certain behaviors or outcomes, we move from the “having” to the “doing.” Because goals are intimately involved in the “doing,” they help clarify the effects of “having.” For example, an optimistic attitude toward life has consistently been documented to be related to higher levels of well-being. If we ask why optimists are happier than pessimists, the answer might seem obvious. An optimist sees the proverbial glass as being half full, while the pessimist sees the glass as being half empty. What else do we need to know? Yet, if you consider that optimists have happier marriages, are better workers, and enjoy better health, then you begin to think about what optimists do that pessimists do not do (Chang, 2002a). Much of the answer concerns differences in goals, planning, and perseverance in the face of difficulties.

In this chapter, we address a number of questions concerning why personal goals are important to well-being, happiness, and a meaningful life. What are goals and how are they measured? What needs and purposes do goals fulfill? How are people’s multiple goals organized and structured? In terms of their impact on well-being and happiness, does it matter what goals people strive to achieve or why they strive to achieve them? For positive psychologists, finding answers to these questions provides a revealing look at what people are trying to accomplish in their lives, and that, in turn, can be evaluated in terms its impact on well-being. For a student of positive psychology, goal research and theory offer a way to think about your own personal goals in terms of their potential contribution to your individual happiness.

**WHAT ARE PERSONAL GOALS?**

**Defining Personal Goals**

In their review of goal constructs in psychology, Austin and Vancouver (1996, p. 338) define goals as “...internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events or processes.” Graduating from college, meeting new friends, or losing weight would exemplify goals as outcomes, while planning a wedding
or having the family over for Thanksgiving would be examples of goals as events. Goals as processes might include activities that are enjoyable in their own right, like reading, nature walks, spending time with friends, or working over time to develop particular skills or interests, such as woodworking, musical talents, or athletic abilities. Desired states may range from fulfillment of biological needs such as hunger, to more complex and long-term desires involved in developing a successful career, to “ultimate concerns” (Emmons, 1999b) with transcendent life meanings expressed through religious and spiritual pursuits.

Karolyi's (1999) review of the goal literature notes that goals may be internally represented in a variety of ways. People may have a specific image of a desired state. For example, many people who live in the upper Midwest, like your textbook authors, start imagining a warm Florida beach in mid-February, after the cold and snow begin to get old. These and other images energize travel plans for many Midwestern university students, who head for Florida during spring break. Personal memories, stories, and if/then scenarios that people use to think about the past, present, and future may also represent goals. A pleasurable or painful memory of a past event may create plans to repeat (or avoid repeating) certain actions and outcomes. Goals in the form of achievements, aspirations, and fulfilled and unfulfilled dreams are a significant part of an individual’s life story and personal identity (McAdams, 1996). Many of our feelings about the past are related to our success or lack of success in accomplishing personally important goals, and our future can be actively imagined through the use of if/then and action/outcome possibilities. For example: “If I get good grades, then I can get into graduate school.” “If I just accept who I am instead of always trying to please others, then I will be happier.”

In summary, goals may be defined as desired outcomes that people expend energy trying to achieve. Goals contain both a cognitive and an emotion-motivational component. Goals are cognitive in the sense that they are mental representations of desired future states. These representations include beliefs, expectations, memories, and images. The emotion-motivational components of goals include the positive and negative feelings associated with thinking about achieving or failing to achieve important goals, evaluations of goal progress, and the emotions following successful or unsuccessful goal attainment. It is this emotion-motivational component that energizes action in goal pursuits.

**Goals and Related Motivational Concepts**

Goals are part of a larger motivational framework in which human behavior is energized and directed toward the achievement of personally relevant outcomes. The diverse array of motivational concepts within psychology includes needs, motives, values, traits, incentives, tasks, projects, concerns, desires, wishes, fantasies, and dreams. These sources of motivation run the gamut from “trivial pursuits” to “magnificent obsessions” (Little, 1989), and from consciously developed plans of action, to behaviors expressing motives that lie outside conscious awareness. In recent years, goals have emerged as a kind of middle ground that helps to organize a variety of motivational concepts. Echoing this sentiment, Karolyi (1999) argued that goals make an independent contribution to human behavior that cannot be subsumed or explained away by other motivational constructs. There is considerable controversy concerning this point, especially regarding whether goals are subsumed by, or distinct from personality (see for example McAdams, 1995; Miller & Read, 1987; Read & Miller, 1998, 2002; Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998). Most goal researchers, however, would agree that goals are connected to other sources of motivation, but they are also distinct and separate psychological entities.

A case for the unique and distinct status of goals, among other motivational concepts, does not mean that needs, values, traits, and other motives are less important than goals, or that goals are more fundamental explanations for people’s actions. In fact, an important topic for this chapter is to examine how goals may express needs, values, and self-concept. As Karolyi (1999) argues, the increased interest in goal-based perspectives within psychology reflects the value of goals as an intermediate level of analysis that connects, mediates, and translates these more general sources of motivation into conscious awareness and intentional action. Goals help make sense of the diverse sources of human motivation by focusing their effects on the more particular reasons and purposes for action over time. Personal goals offer more specific, “here-and-now” insights into people’s ongoing journey.
through life, than do many of the more general and encompassing motivational perspectives. As Karolyi puts it, “goals . . . provide a glimpse into each person’s on-line ‘command center’ ” (1999, p. 269).

This online command center involves the individualized translations of general needs and motives into specific expressive forms that characterize unique individuals. For example, the need for belongingness, while clearly an important and fundamental human motive, is expressed in a limitless variety of behaviors and goals that vary widely among individuals. People might fulfill this need by having many casual friends, having a few close friends, maintaining close ties to their parents and siblings, or by committing themselves to their marriages and their own children. These multiple forms of potential expression are part of the reason that belongingness is considered fundamental and universal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Self-defined personal goals capture how a need shared by all humans is translated or expressed in a particular individual’s life. Personal goals help connect the general to the particular.

The online command center also involves the critical role of goals in self-regulating action over time. (Self-regulated behavior is the topic for Chapter 8.) Goals function as standards and reference points for the evaluation of personal growth and achievement. People’s ongoing evaluation of how they are doing, what new actions need to be taken, and how satisfied they are with life are, in large measure, determined by comparisons of their current status in relation to progress toward and achievement of personally meaningful goals. Goals help tie together feelings about our past, evaluations of our present, and hopes for the future.

**Measuring Personal Goals**

Researchers differ in how they define and measure personal goals; however, all conceptions attempt to capture what people are trying to accomplish in their lives in terms of personally desirable outcomes. Goals have been described as personal concerns (Klinger, 1977, 1998), personal projects (Little, 1989, 1993; Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2007; McGregor & Little, 1998; Palys & Little, 1983), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986, 1999b, 2003), and life tasks (Cantor, 1990; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Cantor & Zirkel, 1990). Researchers typically give a brief description and orienting example of the goal concept and then ask people to describe their most important current goals. For example, in personal project research, participants are told, “We are interested in studying the kinds of activities and concerns that people have in their lives. We call these personal projects. All of us have a number of personal projects at any given time that we think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete” (McGregor & Little, 1998, p. 497). Examples of projects might include “completing my English essay” and “getting more outdoor exercise” (Little, 1989).

In his study of goals conceived as personal strivings, Emmons (1999b) instructed research participants to consider personal strivings as “the things you are typically or characteristically trying to do in your everyday behavior.” Participants were told that these might be either positive objectives they sought, or negative events or things they wanted to avoid. They were also instructed to describe recurring goals rather than one-time goals. Examples of personal strivings include: “trying to persuade others one is right” and “trying to help others in need of help.”

In Cantor’s research (Cantor, 1990; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999), life tasks were introduced to participants with the following instructions. “One way to think about goals is to think about ‘current life tasks.’ For example, imagine a retired person. The following three life tasks may emerge for the individual as he or she faces this difficult time: (1) being productive without a job; (2) shaping a satisfying role with grown children and their families; and (3) enjoying leisure time and activities. These specific tasks constitute important goals since the individual’s energies will be directed toward solving them” (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990, p. 175). Participants in the study were then asked to describe all their current life tasks.

Once a list of self-generated goals is obtained, researchers can ask participants to make a number of additional ratings that get at goal importance, goal conflict, commitment, and perceived attainability. Goals can also be grouped into categories to allow for comparisons among individuals. Depending on the researchers’ interests and definition of the term “goal,” goal categories might be focused on a particular life stage, circumstance, or time-span, or on more general goals that endure over time. For example, Zirkel and Cantor (1990) asked college students to sort their self-described tasks into six categories: academic success, establishing future goals and plans,
making new friends, learning to be on their own without their families, developing their own unique personal identities, and balancing their time between academics and socializing. In contrast, Emmons’ (1999b) research on personal strivings asked people to describe goals at a higher and more general level. His research showed that personal goals can be coded into general categories such as achievement, power, affiliation or relationships, personal growth and health, independence, intimacy, and spirituality. To sum up, personal goals open up a rich assortment of interrelated factors for well-being researchers. Goals capture the guiding purposes in people’s lives that are central to happiness and satisfaction. As we noted earlier, goals may be considered windows for viewing major determinants of well-being.

Goal Organization

Most goal researchers agree that goals can be arranged in a hierarchy with general, more abstract, and “higher-order” goals at the top and more concrete, specific, and “lower-order” goals at the bottom (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Goals higher in the hierarchy are considered more important because they control and give meaning to many lower-order goals. Higher-order goals can easily be broken down into the lower-order subgoals they control. For example, the goal of earning a college degree requires successful achievement of numerous subgoals (e.g., meeting college entrance requirements, signing up for classes, studying, fulfilling graduation requirements, and paying tuition). In this example, getting a degree is a higher-order and more important goal because it organizes and gives purpose to many specific subgoals. Higher-order goals may also be more important because of the personal consequences that may occur if they are not achieved. The consequences of failing to obtain a college degree are more significant than failing one class. Clearly, if all or most subgoals are not achieved, higher-order goals will be lost as well.

A variety of models have provided different foundations for ranking goal-related motivations in terms of their personal or universal importance (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998; and Peterson & Seligman, 2004, for reviews). Nomothetic models have sought to describe relatively universal needs, values, and goals shared by most people, while idiographic models have focused on the unique ordering of goals by particular individuals. While certain need-related and value-related goals appear to have widespread support as being fundamental or universal, there is much less agreement concerning how many goals are necessary to describe the range of human motivations and how they should be arranged in a hierarchic order. Research relating to the universal and individualized views of goal motivations will be the next topics of discussion.

THE SEARCH FOR UNIVERSAL HUMAN MOTIVES

In Chapter 6, we considered the issue of whether happiness has a universal meaning or varies widely across cultures. This section examines the same issue focused on sources of goal-related motivations. If we examined the goals and motives of people from many different cultures, what might we find? Would there be some consensus in the needs and goals considered important around the world? Or, would we end up with an extensive list of motivations too long to be useful? Following in the footsteps of Maslow’s famous early work, recent studies have revisited these questions and found some intriguing answers.

Goals and the Fulfillment of Basic Human Needs

Abraham Maslow’s classic conception of a hierarchy of human needs (1943, 1954) was one of the earliest examples of a motivational hierarchy that attempted to specify universal sources of human motivation. Originally describing five needs, the model later expanded to eight needs regarded as universal among humans. The expansion occurred as the result of subdividing aspects of self-actualization into separate needs. Each need can be thought of as motivating a particular class of behaviors, the goal of which is need fulfillment.

At the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy are basic physiological needs necessary for survival (e.g., needs for food and water). At the second level are needs for safety and security—specifically needs for a safe, stable, and comforting environment in which to live, and a coherent understanding of the world. Belongingness needs, occupying the third rung of the hierarchy, include people’s desires for love, intimacy, and attachment to others through family, friendship, and community relationships. Esteem needs are fourth in the hierarchy. These include the
need for positive self-regard and for approval, respect, and positive regard from others. Next in line are cognitive needs, including needs for knowledge, self-understanding, and novelty. Aesthetic needs seek fulfillment in an appreciation of beauty, nature, form, and order. Second-to-the-top-of the hierarchy are self-actualization needs for personal growth and fulfillment. Self-actualizing individuals fully express and realize their emotional and intellectual potentials to become healthy and fully functioning. At the very top of the hierarchy is the need for transcendence, including religious and spiritual needs to find an overarching purpose for life (Maslow, 1968).

Maslow argued that lower-order needs take precedence over higher-order needs. Higher-order needs are not important, of interest or motivating unless lower-order needs are first satisfied. Maslow viewed human development as the process of progressing up the hierarchy. However, shifting life circumstances can dictate which need commands our attention at any given point in time. Depending on circumstances, a person who was previously motivated by higher-order needs may regress to a lower-order need. For example, many college students have experienced difficulty in finding the motivation to study (cognitive need) after a failed romantic relationship or the death of a loved one (belongingness need).

Maslow’s legacy is still visible in positive psychology. For example, common assumptions among positive psychologists are that the more needs a person has fulfilled, the healthier and happier that person will be, and that unmet needs decrease well-being (Veenhoven, 1995). The eudaimonic conception of a healthy and fully functioning person shares much common ground with Maslow’s description of a self-actualized individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). However, Maslow’s hierarchy has not received extensive research attention, and both its universality and particular ordering of needs have been challenged (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is also easy to think of examples to counter the idea that higher-order needs are not motivating when lower-order needs are unfulfilled. People die for causes they believe in, and find solace in the love of others and in religion when facing terminal illness. People also sacrifice their own needs for the benefit of others, as any parent can tell you. Yet the basic idea that some needs are more compelling than others finds support in the well-being literature. Recall that in very poor nations, financial concerns are important to well-being, in all likelihood because money is essential to the fulfillment of basic survival needs (e.g., Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001). In wealthy countries where basic needs are fulfilled, financial factors are not strongly predictive of happiness. This finding is in line with the idea that higher-order needs (e.g., esteem and cognitive needs) become important only after lower-order needs are met.

Focus on Research: An Empirical Method for Assessing Universal Needs

Despite difficulties with Maslow’s theory, the possibility of establishing a list of universal needs remains appealing. Such a list would help sort and organize the diverse theories postulating widely different needs, values, and goals. A recent study addressed this issue by testing 10 psychological needs as candidates for “universal need” status (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Sheldon and his colleagues identified 10 needs that, based on their similarity, frequency of use, and empirical support within the motivational literature, might be considered universal (Sheldon et al., 2001, adapted from Table 1, p. 328 and Appendix p. 339):

1. Self-esteem: The need to have a positive self-image, a sense of worth, and self-respect, rather than a low self-opinion or feeling that one is not as good as others.
2. Relatedness: The need to feel intimate and mutually caring connections with others, and to have frequent interactions with others as opposed to feeling lonely and estranged.
3. Autonomy: The need to feel that choices are freely made and reflect true interests and values. Expressing a “true self” rather than being forced to act because of external environmental or social pressures.
4. Competence: The need to feel successful, capable, and masterful in meeting difficult challenges rather than feeling like a failure, or feeling ineffective or incompetent.
5. Pleasure/stimulation: The need for novelty, change, and stimulating, enjoyable experiences rather than feeling bored or feeling that life is routine.
6. Physical thriving: The need to be in good health and to have a sense of physical well-being rather than feeling unhealthy and out-of-shape.
7. **Self-actualization/meaning**: The need for personal growth and development of potentials that define who one really is. Finding deeper purpose and meaning in life as opposed to feeling stagnant or feeling that life has little meaning.

8. **Security**: The need to feel safe rather than threatened or uncertain in your present life circumstances; a sense of coherence, control, and predictability in life.

9. **Popularity/influence**: The need to feel admired and respected by other people and to feel that your advice is useful and important, resulting in an ability to influence others’ beliefs and behaviors (as opposed to feeling that you have little influence over others and that no one is interested in your advice or opinions).

10. **Money/luxury**: The need for enough money to buy what you want and to have nice possessions (as opposed to feeling poor and unable to own desirable material possessions).

Sheldon and colleagues (2001) set out to evaluate each of these needs to determine its “universality” based on two criteria. The first criterion stems from the assumption that people’s most satisfying life experiences are related to fulfillment of important needs. This criterion was tested by first having participants (American and South Korean college students) describe their single most satisfying life event. Participants were then asked to rate the degree of relationship between each of the 10 candidate needs and the “most satisfying” event they had described. The second criterion assumes that the experience of positive and negative emotions is related to need fulfillment. This criterion was tested by asking participants to rate the extent to which they felt 20 different positive and negative moods associated with satisfying and dissatisfying events.

Among the most satisfying events mentioned by students were going on a church retreat with friends to clean up a summer camp for a service project, and getting a dream summer job. Their most negative events included breaking up with a romantic partner and being a victim of a violent assault.

Overall findings provided support for the usefulness of these two criteria. Needs were significantly related to satisfying and dissatisfying events, and positive and negative emotions were largely consistent between the U.S. and South Korean samples. Sheldon and colleagues make no claim that their method permits an exact ranking of human needs. However, based on their study, a general and speculative ordering is indicated for the list of needs described above. The numbers 1–10 reflect each need’s rank order in the U.S. sample, based on the first criterion (each need’s importance and relevance to the participants’ most satisfying events). The same rank-ordering of the top four needs emerged using the second criterion (that needs should predict event-related affect): (1) self-esteem, (2) relatedness, (3) autonomy, and (4) competence. The same four needs ranked at the top for the South Korean sample, but their relative positions were slightly different. Specifically, relations with others emerged as more important than self-esteem for South Koreans. This may reflect the difference between the collectivist Asian culture and the individualistic American culture. In both samples, security, physical thriving, and self-actualization occupied middle positions, while popularity-influence and money-luxury appeared to be relatively less important. A slightly different pattern also emerged when students related the candidate needs to their most dissatisfaction life event (e.g., failure of a romantic relationship). For unsatisfying events, the strongest predictors were lack of self-esteem, lack of competence, and lack of security, with the absence of security being the most powerful of all. Taken in total, this study suggests that self-esteem, relatedness, autonomy, and competence are strong candidates for consideration as universal human needs.

**Goals Expressing Fundamental Values**

Fundamental values offer another way to think about universality and hierarchies of human motivation. Most value theories view values as desirable states that function as general guides or principles of living (see Rohan, 2000, for a review). Values describe broad and general goals that may motivate a wide range of behaviors. In a hierarchy of human goals, ranging from concrete (e.g., cleaning your house) to abstract (having a satisfying life), values would occupy a position near the top. A recent theory of values addresses both the hierarchy issue and universality issue. Building on the work of Rokeach (1973), Schwartz and his colleagues developed a comprehensive description of 10 human values whose validity and shared meaning have been demonstrated in 65 nations around the world (Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995; Schwartz, 1992, 1994; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995).
In Schwartz's theory, values are conceived as cognitive representations of three universal requirements for human existence: biological needs of the individual, needs for coordinated social interactions, and needs related to the welfare of groups and social institutions. Because of their assumed connection to important requirements of life, the 10 values are regarded as universal across cultures. People and cultures may differ in how they prioritize their values. That is, how people rank order values in terms of their importance will vary from person to person and from culture to culture. A value may be important to one person and less important or even unimportant to another. In Schwartz's theory, the specific hierarchic arrangement of values depends on the individual, group, and culture.

However, despite differences in priorities, Schwartz has provided evidence showing that the content of 10 human values is widely shared.

Schwartz describes values as “motivational types” because what distinguishes one value from another is the type of motivating goal that each value expresses. Values are regarded as relatively enduring sources of motivation that are stable across adulthood (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). The 10 motivational types of values and relevant goals are summarized in Table 7.1 (adapted from information in Rohan, 2000; Schwartz, 1992).

When you read through Schwartz’s descriptions of human values, your own value priorities may become clearer. If you rank each value in terms of its personal importance, you will undoubtedly embrace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Social status and prestige, control, dominance over people and resources</td>
<td>Social power, authority, wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Personal success demonstrating competence according to social standards</td>
<td>Being successful, capable, influential, hardworking, efficient, achieving goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonism</td>
<td>Pleasures and sensual gratification of oneself</td>
<td>Pleasure, enjoyment of food, sex, leisure, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>Excitement, novelty, challenge in life</td>
<td>Adventure, risk-taking, need for change, new experiences, exciting experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-direction</td>
<td>Independent thought, action and choice; creating and exploring</td>
<td>Creativity, freedom, independence, curiosity, choosing one's own goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection of the welfare of all people and of nature</td>
<td>Being broadminded, seeking wisdom, social justice, fairness, a world of peace, beauty, unity with nature and safe-guarding the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom you are in frequent contact (e.g., family, friends, co-workers)</td>
<td>Helpfulness, honesty, sincerity, genuineness, forgiveness, loyalty to others, responsibility, dependability, reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Respect, commitment and acceptance of customs and ideas that traditional culture and religion provide about the self</td>
<td>Humility, modesty, moderation, acceptance of life circumstances, devout adherence to religious faith and beliefs, respect for time-honored traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Restraint of actions and impulses likely to harm others and violate social norms and expectations</td>
<td>Politeness, courtesy, devout adherence to religious faith and beliefs, respect for time-honored traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Safety, harmony and stability of society, relationships and self</td>
<td>Security of loved ones, national security, social order, cleanliness, neatness, reciprocation of favors, avoidance of indebtedness</td>
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some values more than others. You can probably also think of differences among people you know in terms of value priorities. Some people value stimulation and are always looking for excitement, like to take risks, and get bored easily. Conservative and religious-minded people may place high importance on tradition in Schwartz's value scheme.

The connection between goals and values is explicit in Schwartz's theory because values are defined as broad goals that apply to many situations and remain stable across time. Some of your most personally important goals are probably related to one of the 10 values. A helping professional's career goals, for example, may express the importance of a benevolence value. Because values help define our personal identities and serve as general principles of living, they represent some of our most important, and therefore, higher-order goals. The fact that the values described by Schwartz are shared across cultures argues for their universal importance.

### Personal Goals Across Cultures

Attempts to delineate universal needs and values find a counterpart in a recent study of the content of human goals across 15 cultures (Grouzet et al., 2005). This study provides evidence that the content and organization of personal goals and their connection to fundamental needs and values are shared across cultures.

Nearly 2,000 college students participated in the study representing Western and Eastern Europe, Australia, East Asia, South America, the United States, and Canada. Based on previous studies, Grouzet and colleagues developed a questionnaire to assess the individual importance of 11 different goals. A description of each goal is given in Table 7.2 (adapted from Grouzet et al., 2005, Table 1, p. 802).

Multiple questionnaire items were used to assess each of the 11 goals. Participants rated each item according to its importance as a future life goal, on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 9 (extremely important). Overall, the content of the 11 goals appears to be widely shared across cultures. Goal measures showed acceptable levels of internal reliability and cross-culture equivalence. More importantly, analysis of participant ratings showed a consistent, coherent, and similar pattern for each of the 15 cultures. Based on the statistical pattern of responses, the content of personal goals showed a clear two-dimensional structure across different cultures, as shown in Figure 7.1.

People in each culture organized the 11 personal goals in similar ways. The two goal dimensions were intrinsic-oriented versus extrinsic-oriented goals, and physical versus self-transcendence goals. Each component of the two dimensions was shown

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE 7.2 Personal goals across cultures</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
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<td>Affiliation</td>
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<td>Community feeling</td>
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<td>Conformity</td>
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<td>Financial success</td>
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<td>Hedonism</td>
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<td>Image</td>
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<td>Physical health</td>
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<td>Self-acceptance</td>
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<td>Spirituality</td>
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to be internally consistent and in opposition to its counterpart. That is, people who rated intrinsic goals as important in their lives also rated extrinsic goals as less important. Those giving high ratings to goals related to physical pleasure and survival gave lower ratings to self-transcendent goals.

**INTRINSIC VERSUS EXTRINSIC GOALS** Intrinsic goals are defined by their connection to important psychological needs that are assumed to make their pursuit and fulfillment inherently satisfying. Of the 11 goals measured in this study, intrinsic goals included self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, physical health, and safety. Extrinsic goals express desires for external rewards or praise and admiration from others and are assumed to be less inherently or deeply satisfying when pursued or attained. Extrinsic goals included financial success, image, popularity, and conformity. Goals on this dimension showed high internal consistency.

**PHYSICAL VERSUS SELF-TRANSCENDENT GOALS** Goals associated with the physical versus self-transcendence dimension showed less internal consistency and some overlap with intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Some pleasure/survival and self-transcendence goals may also have intrinsic and extrinsic components. Physical goals were defined by hedonism (seeking pleasure and avoiding pain) and needs for safety, security, and good health. Financial success, interpreted as the means to achieve physical goals, was also associated with this dimension. Self-transcendence goals encompassed needs for a spiritual/religious understanding of life, community feeling promoted by benefiting others and improving the world, and conformity needs reflecting desires to fulfill social obligations and be accepted by others.

Taken as a template for the content of human goals, this study suggests that personal goals can be classified according to how much importance people assign to intrinsic psychological needs as opposed to extrinsic rewards on one hand, and how much value is given to physical pleasures and survival rather than self-transcendent spiritual understandings on the other. The authors conclude, “...as they approach their goals in life, people apparently take into consideration their psychological needs (intrinsic), their physical survival and pleasure (physical),..."
their desires for rewards and praise (extrinsic), and their quest to have a meaningful place in the broader world (self-transcendence)” (Grouzet et al., 2005, p. 813).

Needs, values, and goals that are endorsed by many cultures necessarily have general rather than specific content. Their universality stems from shared human experience and their basis in the biological, psychological, and social requirements of life. The particular expression of goal-related motivations obviously does vary among cultures and between individuals. For example, opportunities to develop individualized career goals and fulfill financial aspirations are clearly more limited in poor countries than in rich ones. Just as clearly, people within the same culture, given the opportunity and sufficient resources, pursue a wide array of careers based on their unique talents, desires, and self-conceptions. In other words, the general content and prioritization of personal goals is clearly influenced by culture, but the specifics of a person’s goals and his or her manner of expression are highly individualized. Recent theories give personal goals a prominent role in people’s self-understanding and self-initiated goal strivings, and they help explain how general goals and motivations become personalized within each person’s unique self-conception.

**THE PERSONALIZATION OF GOALS IN SELF-CONCEPT**

Suppose you were given the task of writing a relatively complete personal history that covered significant life experiences from your past, who you are in the present, and where you’re headed in the future. What would such a description include? Certainly you would write about important life experiences, significant relationships, and the personal qualities and traits that define who you are as a unique individual. Odds are that you would also describe personally relevant goals that you have achieved in the past, goals that you are working to accomplish in the present, and goals that you hope to achieve in the future. In short, our self-concept is partly defined by goals that extend across time from past, through present, to future—who I’ve been, who I am now, and who I might become.

The aspect of self-concept defined by future goals is captured in the idea of “possible selves” as described by Markus and Nurius (1986). Possible selves encompass all the potential futures we can imagine for ourselves. Future selves may be positive, in the form of ideal selves that we want to become, or negative, in the form of selves that we are afraid of becoming. Possible selves we hope to become might include a physically fit self, a wealthy self, a popular self, a loved self, a respected self, or a successful, “A-student” self. Selves we fear becoming might be an overweight self, an unemployed self, a depressed or anxious self, a lonely self, a lazy self, or an academically failing self.

A person’s self-concept plays an important role in processing information, regulating emotion, and motivating behavior (see Baumeister, 1998; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Pittman, 1998, for reviews). Possible selves are most relevant to the third function of self—the motivational view (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). This is because possible selves provide a connection between the past, present, and desired future self and therefore provide motivation for self-change. As Markus and Nurius note, past, present, and future possible selves are distinct and separable, but are also intimately connected. Consider a young college woman working toward her degree who, as a child, experienced the divorce of her parents and the resulting financial hardship suffered by her mother and siblings. This hardship was partly due to her mother’s lack of education and inability to get a good job. It is not hard to imagine how this life event might influence this student’s thinking about her present and future self. Her present, college-student self may be derived and motivated, in part, by a desire to avoid the past self represented by her mother’s experience, and her possible selves would likely include images of a successful career and financial independence.

The idea of possible selves makes an explicit connection between the self and motivation. “An individual’s repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestations of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). In other words, possible selves personalize the form and content of more general needs, values, and goals. In the example above, the young woman’s motivation for college could be thought of as expressing a general need for achievement, or the value of security achieved through a successful
career. However, such explanations, while perhaps revealing at a general level, would miss the unique basis and specific content of the young woman's motivation for college. That is, goals are not typically thought of or pursued in the abstract. We may all have achievement needs, and we may all value security, but for a particular individual, it is "my" achievement of "my" goals that is most important, meaningful, and motivating. As Markus and Nurius describe it, "there is a piece of self" in each of our personal goals (1986, p. 961).

The self is increasingly recognized as an important basis for understanding the what, why, and how of goal-directed behavior, and the relation of goals to happiness and well-being (e.g., Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grassman, 1998; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Our self-conception helps answer questions concerning what goals we choose to pursue and why they are important. The self can be viewed as translating broader sources of motivation into their unique individual expression, assigning importance to particular goal-directed actions (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), and serving an executive function in the control and regulation of behavior toward goal achievement (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Baumeister, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1996; Karolyi, 1999). Many researchers would give self-defining goals a top position in a hierarchy of goal-related motivations. Among our many goals, aspirations, needs, and values, those most central to our sense of self are likely to be most important in organizing and directing our lives.

WHAT GOALS CONTRIBUTE MOST TO WELL-BEING?
Goal Progress, Achievement, and Importance

Research supports the general notion that progressing toward and achieving personally important goals increases people's satisfaction with their lives and themselves (e.g., Brunstein, 1993; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Emmons, 1996; Emmons & Kaiser, 1996; McGregor & Little, 1998). For example, a semester-long study found that students' perceived progress toward achieving their personal goals was significantly correlated with increases in positive emotion and life satisfaction (Brunstein, 1995). Student goals included such things as improving a relationship with a romantic partner, learning enough Spanish to study in Spain, becoming more independent from parents, and learning to be more assertive and confident with others.

Research also supports a general relationship between goal importance and personal satisfaction. Goals that express fundamental and self-defining aspects of personal identity are likely to be the most deeply satisfying when pursued and achieved. Although mundane activities such as fixing a meal, cleaning your house, and paying bills can bring some satisfaction, these goals are relatively less important to our self-conception and therefore tend to produce smaller and more temporary effects on well-being.

Do these conclusions mean that, as long as they are important to us, it doesn't matter much which goals we pursue or why we choose to pursue them? At first thought, the answer may seem to be yes. After all, why would a person expend energy trying to achieve a goal if it didn't have some importance, and if it is important, shouldn't progress or attainment increase feelings of well-being? But several important qualifications temper this general conclusion. Not all personally important goals and not all progress toward goal achievement lead to increased satisfaction. Both the content of a goal and the reasons for pursuing it have been found to affect well-being. Our review of goal research for this chapter focuses on both the "what" of goal content and the "why" of goal motivations, and how each affects well-being. That is, what types of goals and underlying goal motives are related to enhanced happiness and well-being?

Goals whose effects on well-being depend primarily on self-regulation issues will be discussed in Chapter 8. The well-being outcomes for some goals are largely determined by the ease or difficulty people experience in regulating their actions and staying on course toward goal achievement. For example, the pursuit of avoidance or abstract goals creates a host of self-regulation problems.

The Matching Hypothesis

A number of studies support a matching hypothesis as a way of sorting out which goals lead to increased well-being and which do not (see Harackiewicz & Sansone, 1991; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The
matching hypothesis suggests that the degree of person-goal fit determines the effect of goal progress and goal achievement on well-being. Pursuit of goals that express or fulfill (i.e., “match”) an individual’s needs, values, motives, or self-conception is more likely to increase well-being than pursuit of goals that do not fit or match with the person. In other words, if you want to increase your happiness and well-being, the “right” goals to pursue are those that fit and express your most important needs, desires, and sense of self. The “wrong” goals are those that are unrelated to these deeper, enduring personal characteristics. The personal characteristics that underlie goals may be unique to the individual or shared by all people. For example, goals related to belongingness needs may make successful relationships and social interactions universally important to well-being.

To test the matching hypothesis, researchers obtain measures of underlying motivations (such as needs, values, or aspects of self) and ask participants to generate a list of important personal goals. Participants’ goal-related activities and efforts, and their perceived progress toward achieving goals are also assessed. These measures are then related to assessments of well-being across some time period. The matching hypothesis is supported if goal-directed activities and progress that are related to the underlying motive show higher positive correlations with well-being than goals that are unrelated to such a motive.

A number of studies have found support for this underlying motive-goal-well-being relationship. For example, one study investigated the relationship between goals and two fundamental motives, defined as agency and communion (Brunstein et al., 1998). Agency refers to needs for achievement, power, mastery, independence, and self-assertion. Communion refers to needs for affiliation and intimacy, as expressed in a desire to form close relationships with others. People vary in the relative importance of these two general motivations. Some of us are primarily oriented toward agency and others toward communion. Brunstein and his colleagues examined whether goal-motive congruence (or incongruence) predicted well-being.

In two studies, one spanning 2 weeks and the other a semester, college students were classified as either agency-motivated or communion-motivated based on established measures assessing the relative dominance of each motive.

The relationship between personal goals and agency–communion motives was assessed by asking students to describe specific, current and future goals related to each motive. Goals related to agency were defined as “striving for achievement and mastery experiences,” and “striving for independence, social influence, and self reliance.” Personal goals relating to communion were defined as “striving for intimacy and interpersonal closeness,” and “striving for affiliation and friendly social contacts.” Examples of goals reflecting an agency motive included improving understanding of a particular subject, becoming a more independent person, winning an athletic competition, and convincing parents that “my college major is the right thing for me.” Communion-related goals included such things as improving a romantic relationship, being more helpful to a sick mother, spending more time with friends, and developing new friendships with fellow dorm mates. Students also made various ratings of progress, commitment, attainability, effort, and success in relation to their personal goals and recorded daily well-being at selected intervals.

Results provide strong support for the matching hypothesis. Students who were achieving personal goals congruent with their underlying motive-orientation showed increased well-being over the course of the study. This was true for students who focused either on achievement (agency) or on relationships (communion). Conversely, students progressing toward motive-incongruent goals, or who were not achieving motive-congruent goals, showed lower levels (or even declines) in well-being. The important point of the matching hypothesis is that the happiness we obtain from fulfilling our goals depends on their fit with our primary motives in life. You can easily imagine a college student who excels academically, but is unhappy because he wants, but does not have, many close friends. Similarly, an outgoing student enjoying an active social life may be unhappy because she has a strong need to succeed in college, but is struggling academically. In short, not all our goal achievements make us happier.

In a similar vein, our fundamental values also help determine what goals and activities bring us the most satisfaction. A recent study examined college students’ value-orientation in moderating the degree of satisfaction gained from different types of activities (Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999).
Chapter 7 • Personal Goals as Windows to Well-Being

10 values in Schwartz’s value theory (discussed earlier in this chapter) were used to ascertain participants’ value priorities. The 10 values were paired in all possible combinations, and participants were asked to identify which value in each pair held the higher priority for them. This process yielded a prioritized list of each person’s values. Participants also rated their daily well-being across 23 days, gave satisfaction ratings for value-related activities, rated global life satisfaction, and rated satisfaction in the specific life domains of romantic relationships, finances, grades, family, and social life. Consistent with the matching hypothesis, success in value-congruent life domains and activities correlated significantly with both global and daily well-being. For example, the global life satisfaction ratings of students who placed high importance on the value of Achievement were heavily influenced by their degree of satisfaction with their most important achievement domain of life—namely, college grades. The global satisfaction ratings of those who prioritized Benevolence were most affected by their success in the domain of social life; for those prioritizing Conformity (honoring parents and elders), the greatest impact came from their degree of satisfaction with family life. Daily well-being was also significantly related to activities that engaged students’ most important values. Whether students had a “good” day had much to do with whether they had engaged in activities that expressed their most important values. Students prioritizing Universalism (justice, peace, preserving the environment) reported that recycling efforts and involvement in civic affairs were very satisfying, while activities like shopping and buying expensive clothes were more satisfying to students who placed a premium on Power (prestige and wealth). Overall, a student’s value priorities had a determining effect on what areas of life and what activities were the most satisfying.

What Explains the Matching Hypothesis?

The matching hypothesis suggests a simple answer to the question of which goals do or do not enhance well-being. Goals that fit a person’s needs, values, and sense of self are likely to increase well-being, while goals that are mismatched with the person will likely lead to no change, or perhaps even to diminished well-being. What explains the importance of person-goal fit for the satisfaction we obtain from the pursuit and achievement of our goals?

PERSONAL GOALS AND SELF-REALIZATION

Waterman (1990, 1993) suggests that goals fitting with core aspects of the self (such as deeply held values) produce intense feelings of involvement, meaningfulness, and satisfaction because they express our “true selves” and our inner potentials. Personally expressive goal activities provide a strong sense of life purpose: “This is who I am and this is what I was meant to do.” In short, to the extent that our goals match and express our core sense of self, they become avenues for self-realization and self-fulfillment. Such goals acquire particular value and a deeper meaning because their achievement affirms and completes our sense of self (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Personally expressive goals are particularly important to eudaimonic well-being (i.e., to well-being related to meaning, vitality, and healthy functioning), as opposed to hedonic well-being (which is defined by positive emotions and life satisfaction) (see Chapter 2). From a eudaimonic perspective, it is possible for some goals to increase our happiness, but not contribute to increased meaning or vitality. For example, a college student may be happy with his part-time job because it is easy and provides enjoyable relations with co-workers (in other words, the job has high hedonic value). However, the work required by the job may not be personally meaningful if it does not engage significant aspects of his identity and talents (low eudaimonic value). The reverse can also be true. A goal may be unpleasant to carry out (low hedonic value), but personally meaningful (high eudaimonic value). Being a good parent, for example, requires many unpleasant tasks, such as changing dirty diapers, saying “no” to some of your children’s requests, and taking care of sick children. Yet, people regard raising kids as one of life’s most deeply satisfying experiences (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004).

Research supports these distinctions. A variety of goal achievements may increase our hedonic enjoyment. However, achieving goals that express our authentic or true selves seems to contribute most to an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose in life, and to greater psychological health and vitality (e.g., McGregor & Little, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sanderson & Cantor, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne,
Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and goals are not inherently incompatible. Most would agree that an ideal job is one that is personally satisfying in terms of permitting the expression of our interests and talents (intrinsic), and also provides an income that supports a comfortable material life (extrinsic). However, research has shown that problems and dissatisfaction may result if the pursuit of extrinsic goals interferes with fulfillment of the intrinsically satisfying goals that determine happiness and well-being. Kasser and Ryan (1993) suggest that extrinsic goals can lead to negative consequences when they become a person’s dominant motivation. The intrinsic–extrinsic distinction offers a second explanation for the matching hypothesis. Goals that match with the person are more likely to be intrinsically satisfying. Goals that do not match may have extrinsic value, but do not necessarily increase well-being.

**AUTONOMOUS VERSUS CONTROLLED MOTIVATION**

A third explanation for the positive relation between person-goal matching and well-being concerns one’s reasons for pursuing a goal. Self-concordance theory is a recent line of thinking that describes how the reasons behind goal pursuit are critical to well-being outcomes (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Research supporting the theory suggests that pursuing goals for the “right” reasons leads to better goal achievement and personal adjustment. According to self-concordance theory, the “right reasons” have to do with “...the feelings of ownership that people have (or do not have) regarding their self-initiated goals” (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001, p. 152). Sheldon and his colleagues have found that “not all personal goals are personal” in terms of how people experience them (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, p. 546).

Self-concordant goals reflect autonomous motives and freely chosen reasons for goal pursuit that generate feelings of ownership and personal expressiveness and lead to increased well-being. In contrast, controlled motivation refers to cases in which people pursue goals that they have not freely chosen, or that are not personally expressive. For example, let’s say one student is given the opportunity to write a research paper on a topic of great personal interest and relevance to him, while another student is assigned by her professor to write a paper on a topic that has nothing to do with her inherent interests. Concordance theory would predict greater enjoyment, fulfillment, and well-being for the student who experiences personal ownership of his task because he freely chose it, and whose task provides him with an opportunity for personal expressiveness. In the case of the assigned writing project, the writer may not internalize or feel a strong sense of ownership of the goal. This may reduce both the effort expended to achieve the goal and the emotional benefits of goal attainment.

The autonomous motives that define self-concordance may contribute to the well-being effects of person-goal matching. It seems likely that goals which match an individual’s needs, values, and personal identity would also be freely chosen and experienced with the sense of ownership described by self-concordant theory. In other words, matched goals may also be self-concordant goals. Some amount of the increased well-being associated
with matching may be due to this connection with self-concordance.

The distinction between autonomous and controlled motivations also suggests an important qualification to the matching hypothesis. Even a goal that fits the person may not increase well-being if that goal is not also freely chosen. Many careers might fit our interests, talents, and values, but it is the career we, ourselves select that will likely produce the strongest commitment and lead to the greatest satisfaction. Matching, by itself, may not be sufficient to ensure increased well-being from working toward and achieving our goals. Both the “right goals” and the “right reasons” seem to be necessary.

**Focus on Research: Happiness and Success in College**

Do students’ reasons for attending college make a difference in terms of academic success and satisfaction with college life? This was the general question Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001) addressed when they conducted a study to test self-concordance theory. They examined the relationships between self-concordant goals and measures of success, well-being, and adjustment during freshmen students’ first year of college. They were interested in two specific questions. First, do students coming to college with self-concordant goals fare better than students with non-concordant goals? Second, can the increased happiness derived from goal progress and achievement be maintained and provide the basis for further enhanced well-being, or do people slip back to their original levels of happiness?

Following earlier work on **self-determination theory** (Deci & Ryan, 1991; see Chapter 2), the extent of self-concordance was defined according to four degrees of internalization and ownership: external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic. Each term refers to different reasons for pursuing a particular goal, with these reasons varying along a continuum from controlled/imposed to autonomous/freely-chosen (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). The following descriptions and example items (arranged from least- to most-autonomous) summarize concepts presented by Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001, p. 155).

**External** motives refer to the rewards, approval, praise, or situational demands that explain why we strive for a goal. These motives are the most controlled and least self-concordant. Example item: “You strive for this goal because somebody else wants you to, or because the situation seems to compel it.”

**Introjected** motives involve negative emotions we may experience if we don’t try to attain certain goals. These motives are also considered to reflect controlled motives and therefore are not self-concordant. Example item: “You strive for this goal because you would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if you didn’t.”

**Identified** motives involve valuing a goal because of its personal importance, though people may sometimes come to value a goal because of the influence of others. For example, a teacher might foster respect for the environment among her students. In this case, the original source of the goal is external. However, “identified” means that others (in this case, the students) have internalized the goal and made it their own. Example item: “You strive for this goal because you really believe it’s an important goal to have.”

**Intrinsic** motives involve emotional pleasure and enjoyment derived from pursuing a goal. Intrinsic motives are the most autonomous and self-concordant goal motives. Example item: “You strive for this goal because of the enjoyment or stimulation which that goal provides you.”

Nearly 200 freshmen at the University of Missouri–Columbia were asked to list their eight most important personal goals as they entered their first semester of college. Getting good grades, getting involved in campus organizations, making friends, not gaining weight, and maintaining weekly contact with parents were among the goals students described. Students categorized their reasons for pursuing each goal according to the four motives described above. Twice each semester students also rated how well they were progressing toward each of their eight goals. At the beginning of the spring semester, students could revise their list of eight goals or retain the ones they had listed in the fall.

Students’ reasons for college attendance were measured and classified according to the four levels along the autonomous-to-controlled continuum of motivation. For example, did students feel they “had to” attend college because of parental pressure, because all their friends were going, or because they believed that college was the only way to get a rewarding career (external motives)? Would they feel guilty or anxious if they didn’t go, perhaps because they worried they would disappoint their parents, or be unable to get a good job (introjected
motives? Was college attendance motivated by the personal importance and value of a college education that they may have been taught by parents or high school teachers (identified motives)? Or was the primary motivation for college based on the anticipated enjoyment and stimulation that result from encountering intellectual challenge, meeting new friends, learning about new ideas and people with different lifestyles, and being on their own, away from family (intrinsic motives)?

Well-being measures were taken several times during each semester. Students completed measures of social/emotional/academic adjustment to college and measures of their progress toward establishing healthy personal, social, and occupational identities. Academic performance was assessed by students’ fall and spring semester grades. Parents and peers also rated each student in the study on several of the well-being and motivation measures to provide a validity check of student responses.

Results support the importance of pursuing self-concordant goals. Students with self-concordant goals did better than those with less concordant goals. In the first-semester phase of the study, students who had expressed identified and intrinsic reasons for college attendance and specific semester goals were more likely to earn grades higher than predicted by their scores on a college placement test called the ACT, and were more likely to attain their personal goals. In turn, goal attainment was predictive of better social, emotional, and academic adjustment to college, clearer personal identity development, and an increased likelihood of adopting even more self-concordant goals in the second-semester phase of the study. The second-semester phase examined whether the benefits of self-concordant goal attainment would be maintained and provide a basis for further increases in well-being. Many students lost some of the well-being they had gained during the first semester, and such losses were related to poor progress toward personal goals in the second semester. However, those students who continued to make progress toward their personal goals in the second semester were able to maintain and, in some cases, even increase beyond previous gains in well-being. This latter finding suggests the possibility of an upward increase in well-being similar to the one described by Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (see Chapter 3).

According to Fredrickson’s theory, positive emotions help build personal resources that contribute to greater effectiveness and health, thereby producing an upward spiral of well-being. In a similar fashion, self-concordant goals expressing intrinsic and identified motivations appear to contribute to greater goal success which, in turn, increases well-being. Enhanced well-being may then increase the likelihood of pursuing additional self-concordant goals in the future, thus contributing to greater well-being and continuing the upward spiral of increased happiness and well-being. Sheldon and House-Marko (2001) note that keeping this cycle going is hard work because, as their data show, the upward spiral of well-being seems to require continued success in attaining personal goals. Given the uncertainties of life and setbacks in achieving our goals, the risk of backsliding to baseline levels of well-being is difficult to avoid (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of adaptation processes). However, Sheldon and House-Marko speculate that if increased well-being can be sustained long enough, perhaps an individual may permanently alter her level of expected happiness and adopt a new sense of self as a happy person. This, in turn, might create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the person thinks, feels, and acts in ways that sustain the new self-definition.

We began this section with the question, “Which goals contribute most to well-being?” Research provides the following answers: Goals that (1) fit or match a person’s needs, values, and motives; (2) are deeply expressive of personal identity; (3) are oriented toward intrinsically satisfying activities; and (4) have been autonomously chosen. By implication, goals that are less likely to increase well-being have the opposite characteristics (i.e., goals that are mismatched, disconnected from identity, extrinsic, and arise from controlled origins). Our discussion of goals that are related and unrelated to increased life satisfaction provides a basis for understanding a well-documented finding in positive psychology concerning materialistic goals. People who give high goal priority to the pursuit of money, possessions, social recognition, and physical appearance are likely to be unhappy. Studies reviewed in Chapter 6 concluded that, beyond the point necessary to satisfy basic needs, more money does not have any appreciable positive effect on personal happiness. Research on materialistic life goals not only affirms this conclusion, but also suggests that the single-minded pursuit of money can cause unhappiness.
MATERIALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Psychologists will hopefully excuse our play on Freud’s classic work, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1961, initially published in 1930), for the title of this section. The thematic parallels between the discontents of civilization and the discontents of materialism are strong. Freud described the frustrations, sufferings, and dilemmas that result from the inevitable conflict between the self-centered needs of individuals and the co-operative and self-sacrificing requirements of civilized society. Studies of materialism seem to describe a similar dilemma between what Ryan (2002, p. ix) referred to as the “religions of consumerism and materialism” in affluent societies and the unhappiness that befalls their faithful followers.

Materialism and consumption can be blamed for any number of macro-level social and environmental ills, from the great divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” to global warming and environmental degradation. Psychological studies offer a more micro-level view of the individual consequences of materialistic life aspirations. The research literature documents many personal problems that are both causes and consequences of materialism. Recent theories help explain how materialistic aspirations undermine well-being and why people may come to embrace materialistic life values. We begin with a review of one of the first studies to show the discontents of materialism.

In an article titled, “A dark side of the American dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration,” Kasser and Ryan (1993) examined the relationship between college students’ life priorities and measures of well-being. The relative importance of four goals was used to assess students’ central life aspirations. Life aspirations were assessed in two ways: a measure of guiding principles and an aspiration index. The guiding principles measure asked students to rank-order the importance of five values: money, family security, global welfare, spirituality, and hedonic enjoyment. The life aspirations index involved rating the importance and likelihood of attaining four goals. Several specific statements represented each goal. **Self-acceptance** refers to people’s desire for personal autonomy, psychological growth, and self-esteem. Examples of statements that students rated for this goal were: “At the end of your life you will look back on your life as meaningful and complete.” “You will be in charge of your life.” “You will know and accept who you really are.” **Affiliation** goals were defined by the importance of family and good friends. Specific statements included: “You will have good friends that you can count on.” “You will share your life with someone you love.” “You will have people who care about you and who are supportive.” **Community feeling** reflects a desire to make the world a better place by contributing to the common good. Statements in this category included: “You will help others improve their lives.” “You will donate time or money to charity.” “You will work for the betterment of society.” **Financial success** is related to the importance placed on attaining wealth and material success. Statements in this goal category included: “You will be financially successful.” “You will have a high-status job.” “You will buy things just because you want them.”

Assessment of health and well-being included measures of self-actualization, vitality, control orientation, and several measures of physical and emotional health. The self-actualization measure assessed accurate perceptions of reality, sense of social interest, personal autonomy, and engagement in relationships. The vitality measure assessed the degree to which people feel energetic, vigorous, and “alive” in their physical and mental activities. Control orientation refers to the relative importance of external factors and rewards in shaping a person’s motives and goals.

In three separate studies involving nearly 500 young adults, Kasser and Ryan (1996) found a consistent inverse relationship between financial aspirations and well-being. In other words, placing high priority on financial success was related to lower well-being. Specifically, those people who rated the extrinsic goals of wealth and material success as more important than the intrinsic goals (such as self-acceptance, affiliation, and contributions to the community) showed lower levels of self-actualization, life vitality, and social adjustment, and greater depression and anxiety. It is important to note that the key variable here is the dominance of financial aspirations over other life goals. It was not financial aspirations per se that were related to lower well-being. Diminished health and well-being were found only for those people who consistently rated finances as *more* important than the other three goals. Other studies found that, in addition to financial success, emphases on social recognition, social status, and physical appearance were also related to lower well-being (Kasser, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).
Since the publication of Ryan and Kasser’s study, research has documented a number of negative life outcomes associated with materialistic aspirations (see Kasser, 2002, 2004; Kasser & Kanner, 2004, for detailed reviews).

People who are highly committed to extrinsic materialistic goals score lower on a variety of self-reported and independent assessments of quality of life, compared to those who either do not assign high value to materialistic goals, or who show a balance between their financial and intrinsic motivations. Materialistic individuals suffer more physical illness and anxiety symptoms, experience fewer positive emotions, watch more television, use more drugs and alcohol, are at higher risk for personality disorders and depression, and report less satisfying relationships with others. In addition, the general relationship between goal progress and increased well-being that is true for most goals does not hold true in the case of materialistic goals. For example, Sheldon and Elliot (1998) found that making progress toward materialistic aspirations was not related to increases in short- or longer-term well-being. These conclusions have been documented among people within many different age groups, social and economic backgrounds, and cultures. That is, the connections between materialistic values and lower well-being are not confined to American culture. Kasser and Kanner (2004) note studies in Australia, England, Germany, South Korea, Romania, and Russia replicate findings within the U.S. samples.

In short, no matter who or where you are, materialism appears to undercut happiness.

Figure 7.2 shows results from a study by Diener and Oishi (2000) of 7,000 college students in 41 different countries. The importance students assigned to money and love are plotted against their self-reported ratings of life satisfaction. As you can see, the more importance students gave to money, the less they were satisfied with their lives. Love showed an opposite relationship to life satisfaction.

**Why Are Materialists Unhappy?**

**THE CONTENT OF MATERIALISTIC GOALS** Why would placing more importance on financial success than on self-acceptance, affiliation, and community contribute to personal unhappiness? A “goal contents” explanation suggests that extrinsic goals (such as financial success or social status) are less satisfying than intrinsic goals (such as personal growth or emotional intimacy with others), because intrinsic goals reflect basic psychological needs, satisfaction of which is required for health and happiness (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). Intrinsic goals are inherently rewarding because of their connection to fundamental human needs. Extrinsic goals, on the other hand, may not fulfill our most important needs and therefore pursuing them, perhaps at the expense of intrinsically satisfying goals, may lead to lower well-being.

The dominance of extrinsic financial goals may also interfere with the pursuit of intrinsic goals and divert people from the more important and deeper satisfactions in life. For example, people who value self-acceptance are interested in developing the self-understanding necessary to direct their own lives in a manner that is consistent with their talents, inner potentials, and sense of self. As we have seen, goals that are consistent with the self tend to enhance well-being. In contrast, people with strong financial aspirations may deflect their attention away from self-examination and self-expression and make choices that diminish personal satisfaction. Choosing a particular career only because you can make a lot of money, without regard for the kind of work you find meaningful or satisfying, is probably one example of a recipe for later unhappiness.
A high level of concern with finances may also cause people to ignore or fail to invest in developing the close, supportive relationships that are such an important source of well-being. In line with this possibility, a recent series of studies by Vohs and her colleagues (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006) showed that simply thinking about money seems to shift people’s thoughts toward self-sufficiency and independence from others. Money seems to make us feel self-sufficient and able to make it on our own, but at some cost to our interpersonal relationships. Compared to control groups, people primed to think about money were consistently found to be less helpful and sensitive to others and more desirous of being on their own and completing tasks independently. These findings reinforce the general conclusion that those human needs most important for well-being and personal happiness may be frustrated, ignored, or inadequately fulfilled among people who devote most of their time and energy to pursuing materialistic goals.

THE WHAT AND WHY OF MATERIALISTIC GOALS A second explanation emerged from a controversy concerning the relative importance of goal content and goal motive. Does the materialism–unhappiness association result from the content of materialistic goals (in other words, what is pursued) or from the motive that underlies them (in other words, why they are pursued)? As we have seen, the goal contents explanation is focused on how commitment to materialistic aspirations may divert attention away from fulfilling needs that would contribute more to happiness and well-being. On the other hand, the motive explanation focuses on the reason behind goal pursuit—specifically whether the reason is autonomous or controlled (Carver & Baird, 1998; Srivastava, Locke, & Bartol, 2001). As described in our earlier discussion of the self-concordance model, external rewards and introjected motives are controlled motives, while identified and intrinsic motives are autonomous or freely-chosen motives for goal striving.

Critics of the goal contents explanation argue that financial goals are likely to involve controlled sources of motivation, which have been linked to poor well-being outcomes. Desires for money, fame, social recognition, and popularity seem to fit especially well with the concept of controlled motives based on external rewards. Introjected motives stemming from unpleasant feelings of anxiety, guilt, and insecurity might also lie behind materialistic strivings. In either case, it is the motive—not just goal content—that makes financial aspirations damaging to well-being. Financial goals may not necessarily reduce happiness if people have the “right” motives (i.e., autonomous ones). Carver and Baird (1998) argue that it is quite possible for a person to value a high-income career because of the excitement and enjoyment it brings (intrinsic motives), and/or because she truly believes it is valuable or important (identified motives). In these cases, well-being would likely increase rather than decrease. In Carver and Baird’s view, two people with strong desires for wealth, fame, and fortune will have different well-being outcomes depending on whether their motives reflect external/introjected or identified/intrinsic motivations. In short, it’s the motive—not goal content—that is important.

A recent study helps sort out explanations for the effects of “what” and “why” in people’s goal strivings. Sheldon and his colleagues conducted three studies to evaluate the relative importance of goal content and goal motive (2004). The content of personal goals was evaluated by having participants rate the extent to which each of their specific self-identified goals contributed to achievement of six “possible futures.” Three of these possible futures represented intrinsic values (achieving meaningful, close, and caring relationships; personal growth resulting in a fulfilled and a meaningful life; and contributing to society by making the world a better place). The other three possible futures were oriented toward extrinsic values (achieving financial success by getting a high-income job and having many material possessions; attaining popularity/fame, as measured by being known and admired by lots of people; and presenting an attractive physical image in terms of looking good and being attractive to others). Goal motives were assessed according to participants’ ratings of the external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic motives for pursuing a goal. Well-being was assessed using standard measures of the balance of positive and negative emotions and life satisfaction.

Overall, the results of the three studies showed that both goal content and goal motive made independent contributions to well-being. The participants who expressed the highest levels of well-being were those who were pursuing intrinsic goals for autonomous reasons (i.e., identified or intrinsic motives). Lower well-being was reported by those who were pursuing extrinsic goals for
which motivation was controlled (i.e., external or introjected motives). Some of the strongest evidence for the detrimental effects of extrinsic goals and controlled motivation on well-being was shown in one of Sheldon and colleagues’ studies that assessed personal goals and well-being among college students over a 1-year period following graduation. Graduates with a controlled motivational orientation who were pursuing extrinsic goals (e.g., money and fame) reported lower levels of well-being than graduates who were striving toward intrinsic goals with autonomous motivations.

**COMPENSATION FOR INSECURITY** A third explanation for the link between an over-emphasis on financial goals and lower well-being focuses on psychological insecurities and unmet needs (Kasser, 2002, 2004; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004). Some theorists suggest that materialists may be unhappy people to begin with. People who are emotionally and socially insecure may view financial success as a means of enhancing their self-image and social image, thereby reducing their feelings of insecurity. Having lots of money may be seen as a way to “prove” oneself, gain the admiration of others, and compensate for unmet needs. This may seem like a vain and shallow illusion, but what parent wouldn’t point with pride to their rich, successful son or daughter? And who hasn’t had wishful fantasies of being rich and famous? Many social observers argue that American culture encourages the idea that “being somebody” means making lots of money and having expensive possessions (e.g., Cushman, 1999; Easterbrook, 2003; Paterson, 2006; Storey, 1999).

**Why Do People Adopt Materialistic Values?**

Three factors appear to exert important influence on the development of materialistic values: (1) growing up in a consumer culture; (2) psychological insecurity; and (3) the connection between materialism and death. Each of these will be explored below.

**CONSUMER CULTURE** Self, culture, and personal goals are interlinked. All cultures shape children’s developing sense of who they are and who they should strive to become. The love of parents, acceptance by peers, and success in life tasks are, at least in part, contingent on embracing your culture’s values and practices. In contributing to the general shape of self, culture also influences personal goals. As we saw in Chapter 6, beliefs about the meaning of the good life and how to achieve it differ between Western and Eastern cultures. While the specific meaning and expression vary by individual, culture sets many of the foundational assumptions and dominant values that define success and happiness.

Within consumer societies, the influence of culture on goals provides one avenue for the adoption of materialistic aspirations and values. Even a casual observer can note children’s exposure to countless socializing messages and models promoting the individual and social benefits of money and material possessions. Some 12 billion dollars are spent annually on the marketing of products to kids in what Levin and Linn call the “commercialization of childhood” (Levin & Linn, 2004). Toy sales related to blockbuster children’s movies like Star Wars and Harry Potter, now rival ticket revenues. Concern over the possible damaging effects of this commercialization led the governments of Norway and Sweden to prohibit ads from targeting children under age 12.

In the adult realm, we are all familiar with advertisements suggesting (either explicitly or implicitly) that our personal problems can be solved and our happiness ensured if we buy the “right” product or service. Some ads are pitched to people’s vulnerabilities, such as feelings of inadequacy, social anxiety, boredom, loneliness, and concerns over poor appearance. Others offer the purchase of increased happiness, fun, fame, fortune, adventure, sex, romance, and the envy of friends.

The bottom line of these messages, as Kasser (2004) so aptly put it, is that the good life is the “goods” life. Such ads promote a materialistic value orientation described by Kasser and his colleagues as “… the belief that it’s important to pursue the culturally sanctioned goals of attaining financial success, having nice possessions, having the right image (produced, in large part, through consumer goods), and having a high status (defined mostly by the size of one’s pocketbook and the scope of one’s possessions)” (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004, p. 13). The key question is, as we buy the products and celebrate models of fame and fortune, do we also buy the assumption that a life centered around materialistic goals is the route to personal happiness?
For some social observers, the answer is clearly yes. Classic sociologists from Marx to Veblen have described the false needs and shallow, materialistic lives promoted by capitalistic societies (see Paterson, 2006; Storey, 1999, for reviews). From this view, consumption as a dominant cultural practice diverts attention from deeper life satisfactions and masks the power and control held by the few over the many. Taking a psychological perspective, Cushman (1990) argues that consumer economies have created an “empty self” by stripping away deeper and more enduring meanings and social connections associated with close family ties, community connections, and satisfying work. An empty self makes people particularly vulnerable to the “make-you-happy” messages of advertisements. However, Cushman believes that the marketplace only offers a “lifestyle solution” to problems of finding purpose and meaning in life. Having the “right” look and the right “stuff” is a poor and unsatisfying substitute for the deeper purposes and caring connections to others that promote healthy well-being.

On the other side of the debate are arguments that consumer societies offer unprecedented opportunities for freedom of choice in how people express their talents, interests, values, and personalities. From this perspective, consumer goods enhance, rather than constrain lifestyle alternatives. The diversity and easy availability of products and services supports highly individualized meanings of a good life. Positive psychology does not settle long-standing debates concerning the virtues and vices of consumerism. However, research does offer some clarification about who is most likely to embrace the materialistic messages of consumer cultures and, consequently, suffer their ill effects.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL INSECURITY** A growing body of evidence suggests that materialism may find its strongest support among insecure people. Doubts about self-worth and acceptance by others, frustrated needs, and economic hardship all appear to increase the odds of adopting materialistic life goals (see Kasser, 2002; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Solberg et al., 2004, for reviews). The compensation explanation, discussed earlier, suggests that people may adopt materialistic goals to compensate for negative feelings related to insecurity and unmet needs. Expensive possessions and a big salary may serve as vehicles for obtaining social approval and a sense of self-worth among people whose social and self-competence needs have been frustrated or unfulfilled. This conclusion is supported by research, which has found a consistent relationship between unfulfilled basic needs and materialistic values. Unmet needs are assumed to create a sense of insecurity that may then lead to material goals as compensation. Parenting practices that do a poor job of meeting children’s needs have been linked to a materialistic value orientation among children. Parents who are overly controlling, punitive, lacking in warmth, and unsupportive of their children’s needs for independence and autonomy increase the odds of materialistic aspirations in their children. Increased materialism in children is also associated with parental divorce. Specifically, research findings suggest that this association results more from the fact that divorce disrupts the fulfillment of children’s basic needs for emotional support, love and affection, than from reduced financial resources. Research reviewed by Kasser and Kanner (2004) also shows that people growing up in poor families, in poor countries, and during hard economic times tend to be more materialistic. It is not hard to imagine that poverty and economic stress would make people feel insecure and vulnerable, and that materialistic life goals might become a compensating solution.

**MATERIALISM AND DEATH** In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, The Denial of Death, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) argued that fear of death is the ultimate and universal source of human insecurity. Freud focused on the conflicts and repressed feelings surrounding sexuality and death as the underpinnings of human behavior. In contrast, Becker argued that many of humans’ individual and collective actions are motivated by a need to deny and blunt the fear caused by awareness of death as an inevitable fact of life. The after-life of religions, monuments from the Egyptian pyramids to modern skyscrapers, and the celebration of cultural heroes who triumph over threats to their destruction, all serve to deny the reality of death by creating symbols and icons suggesting that death can be transcended. The symbolic message of such icons is that we don’t really die. Because death is intimately connected to nature, Becker viewed human efforts to control and subdue the natural environment as also expressing a death-defying motivation. Control over nature gives the illusion of control over death.

Within contemporary psychology, terror management theory has drawn on Becker’s insights in
describing how fear of death motivates attempts to restore a sense of safety and security (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1999; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Terror management theory places fear of death in the context of evolution and the unique ways that each species strives to ensure its own self-preservation. Human survival depends primarily on intelligence and sociability, because our physical defenses are relatively weak compared to other animals. The evolutionary perspective goes on to suggest that, as intelligent social animals, our ancestors developed tools, weapons, and housing, and formed cooperative groups that promoted proliferation and prosperous survival of the species.

Human intelligence, however, comes with a price tag. Intelligence brings with it self-awareness of being alive and the ability to contemplate our past, present, and future. Awareness of our future includes the certainty of our own death and the fact, as Becker so bluntly put it, that we will all end up underground as “food for worms” (1973, p. 26). Thinking of ourselves as worm-food is certainly unpleasant, if not repulsive. We are not likely to focus on this thought for long before we shift our attention to something a bit less gruesome. This mini-version of avoiding death exemplifies the assumptions and logic of terror management theory. Humans share with all living things a fundamental biological drive for self-preservation, but humans are unique in their awareness of eventual death. This awareness has the potential to cause overwhelming and incapacitating terror that must be “managed” to reduce and avoid its potentially debilitating effects. Following Becker, terror management theory states that all cultures develop belief systems that serve as defenses against the terror of death. These beliefs give meaning and purpose to life and provide a basis for individual feelings of self-esteem and enduring value. Terror management theory predicts that confronting thoughts or images of death creates feelings of insecurity that motivate a defensive strengthening of worldviews and self-esteem, in order to restore a sense of security. Numerous studies provide support for these predictions (see Greenberg et al., 1999; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004).

What does anxiety about death have to do with materialism? Since research has established a general link between insecurity and materialism, insecurities rooted in thoughts of death may also increase materialistic aspirations. Money, status, and possessions may provide a sense of safety and security. To test this idea, Kasser and Sheldon (2000) assessed the preexisting materialistic value-orientation of college students by examining the relative importance they placed on intrinsic goals (self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling) versus extrinsic goals (financial success, attractive appearance, social recognition). Students were then assigned to one of two conditions. In the mortality salience condition, students wrote about the prospect of their own death in terms of the feelings it aroused and what they believed would happen to their physical bodies after death. In the control condition, students wrote about listening to music. Next, students in both groups were asked to estimate their financial situation 15 years in the future. Financial expectations included their overall financial worth (salary, investments), pleasure spending (travel, clothes, entertainment), and the value of possessions (car, household possessions, etc.).

Consistent with predictions, students in the mortality salience condition gave estimates of future income and wealth that were considerably higher than the estimates given by students in the control group. In fact, in some cases, the estimates of students who had written about death were nearly twice as high as those who had written about listening to music. This result seems to stem from the effect of mortality salience, rather than from students' preexisting values. In other words, the financial expectations expressed at the end of the study were unrelated to students' preexisting values, as measured at the beginning of the study.

Further evidence for the effect of mortality salience was shown in a second study by the same authors. In this study, students were instructed to play the role of company owners who were making bids on timber harvest in a national forest. Students were told that if their bids were too small their company might not survive, but if all companies consistently made large bids, the forest resource might be lost. The researchers set up the same mortality salience and control conditions, and used the same writing assignments as they used in the study described above. Again, the process of thinking about their own death affected students' responses. Students in the mortality salience condition gave significantly higher timber bids, suggesting increased feelings of greed and a need to acquire more than others.

Solomon and his colleagues (2004), (the developers of terror management theory) provide a speculative, yet intriguing historical analysis of how
death and materialism have become connected. They argue that the appeal of conspicuous consumption (buying well beyond one's needs) may lie in an unacknowledged, and perhaps unconscious, connection of money and material possessions with religion, spirituality, and the transcendence of death. Drawing on the work of Ernest Becker and others, their analysis suggests that the accumulation of money and possessions has a consistent historical link to prestige, symbolic meanings, and spirituality. The concept of money as simply a vehicle for the exchange of goods and services is actually quite recent. In ancient Egypt, for example, gold was largely ignored until it was used to replicate a shell that symbolized life-sustaining powers that would ward off death and prolong the existence of the souls of the already dead. The word money, itself, may have originated from the temple of Juno Moneta in Rome, where priests set up the first mints to produce coins. Coins were imprinted with images of gods, kings, and other religious symbols.

If all this seems a bit far-fetched, Solomon and his colleagues might ask you to examine the back of a dollar bill. What are the phrase, “In God We Trust” and a picture of pyramid with an eye at the top doing on a dollar bill? One interpretation is that these words and symbols connect money to spirituality and immortality. The pyramid may represent the path to immortality with the eye representing the world of God that is open to those who reach the top. Ernest Becker was convinced that money and the ability to pass on accumulated wealth to posterity were intimately bound up with the denial of death and with attempts to achieve a measure of immortality. You die, but your wealth and possessions live on. Money undoubtedly does contribute to a sense of security and control over life. A fat bank account probably does bring some comfort and a sense of security. The bottom line for both Becker and terror management theory is that, at some unconscious and symbolic level, money increases our sense of personal significance in the face of inevitable death.

**Affluence and Materialism**

The relationship between psychological insecurity and materialism appears to be a two-way street. As described above, insecurity is both a cause and a consequence of materialistic aspirations. Insecurity contributes to the adoption of materialistic goals when people try to compensate for unmet needs through financial strivings. Insecurity and unhappiness are also consequences, because material aspirations reduce the likelihood that important needs will be fulfilled. The painful irony here is that materialism seems to frustrate the satisfaction of the very needs from which it originated. Recent studies by developmental psychologists suggest an additional irony to the materialism story. Not only is striving for financial success associated with unhappiness, but achieving it is also a potential source of problems for affluent families. Children growing up in affluent families may be at increased risk for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems caused by the beliefs and practices of their financially successful parents. Whatever beliefs and motivations led to parents' financial success, and whatever affluent parents may teach about material values, affluent lifestyles may not be healthy for children.

In Chapter 6, we reviewed national statistics showing that the nation's increased affluence over the last 50 years has not brought increased happiness. In fact, affluence was associated with some amount of increased misery in the form of higher rates of depression and other personal problems, particularly among young people. Recent investigations of affluent families provide a more specific and revealing look at how affluence may be connected to the problems of children and youths. Despite the widespread assumption that kids of well-to-do parents enjoy a "privileged status," Luthar (1999, 2003) reviews evidence showing that many affluent children suffer more problems than children of low-income families. One of these studies (Luthar & D'Advanzo, 1999) compared lower socioeconomic status (SES) inner-city teens to upper SES youths living in the suburbs. Surprisingly, affluent teens showed greater levels of maladjustment than their low-income, inner-city counterparts. Specifically, they reported higher rates of drug use (e.g., alcohol, marijuana), higher levels of anxiety, and more depressive symptoms. The findings regarding depression among high-SES teens were particularly striking because their depression levels were not only higher than the inner-city group, but were also three times higher than the national average. One in five (20%) of the 10th-grade suburban girls in this study reported clinically significant symptoms of depression. Levels of anxiety among boys and girls in the affluent group were also significantly above national averages. A well-known study by Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (2000) also found lower levels of well-being among
high-compared to low-income teenagers. Based on experience sampling of moods and feelings of over 800 teens, these researchers found that the most affluent teens reported the lowest levels of happiness and those in the low-income group showed the highest levels of happiness.

Why would affluent teens be unhappy? Two preliminary explanations suggest that it is not affluence per se, but the behaviors and expectations of parents that are critical to youths’ adjustment. Luthar argues that available research and observations of family experts and clinical psychologists point to achievement pressures and isolation from adult supervision as probable causes of distress among high-SES children. Some children face strong pressures to excel in everything they do and much of what they do is arranged by parents. The number of private and public programs devoted to enhancing children’s athletic, musical, learning, and growth potentials has increased dramatically. Affluent parents who make sure their kids are enrolled in as many of these programs as possible may blur the distinction between childhood and adulthood, making children’s lives more like those of adults. Stress, responsibility, pressures to succeed, and a day filled with activities from morning until night may destroy the idle play and innocence of childhood. Luthar cites evidence suggesting that children faced with these pressures suffer more stress-related illness, from stomachaches and headaches to insomnia. Children may even exaggerate these physical symptoms in order to have an acceptable excuse for taking time out from their hectic lives.

Children in other affluent families may experience an opposite pattern. Two parents who work long hours and come home late and tired may simply not be optimally available physically and emotionally to nurture and supervise their children. Such parents may provide ample money, beautiful homes, cell phones, computers, big-screen TVs, and cars to their children, but may fail to supply the deep involvement and careful supervision that kids need. The PBS documentary examining The Lost Children of Rockdale County (see Chapter 1) found that some affluent children seem to lead empty lives. Their homes are devoid of supervision; they lack sufficient contact with their parents and their lives are empty of purpose and direction, aside from whatever short-term pleasures and diversions they may find with their friends. Such teens desire connection, attention, and a sense of direction from others. When parents do not fulfill these needs, peers fill the void, much like Cushman’s argument about consumption filling up the empty self. Unfortunately, Rockdale County teens filled up their lives with drug abuse, delinquency, and sexual promiscuity.

Luthar cautions that the investigation of affluent families is still in its very beginning stages. So far, it is mostly people living in the northeastern United States that have been studied. It is too early to tell whether these findings reveal a general pattern or one that applies only to a narrow range of affluent families. Both longitudinal studies and more detailed examinations of specific elements of family life are needed to clarify the causal variables involved. And certainly, there are affluent families in which parents do manage to provide effectively for the emotional needs of their children. However, early indications are that the lives of some affluent families may be a troubling example of materialism and its discontents.

Are We All Materialists?

Several important qualifications must be made to avoid overgeneralizing the negative effects of materialism. Most people may be materialists in the sense that they aspire to earn a good income and own a nice house, car, and other possessions. However, these aspirations, in and of themselves, are not problematic. Recall that the negative effects of materialistic values occur only for those individuals who place financial aspirations, social recognition, and appearances ahead of other important psychological needs. It is this imbalance, rather than material goals themselves, that seems to cause unhappiness. It is also worth noting that national surveys show a majority of Americans to be reasonably happy and satisfied with their lives (Diener & Diener, 1996). Over the last 50 years, increased affluence and consumer goods have not made us happier, but neither have they made us less happy. Average Americans, on the whole, do not appear to be suffering from unhappiness caused by the type of excessive materialism documented in research. This is not to deny evidence for rising rates of depression, drug use, and other personal problems among well-to-do young people that may document the potential dark side of increasing affluence. However, most of us would probably agree that our everyday experience suggests that the lives of most people...
we encounter are not dominated by excessive consumption. Instead, there seems to be a balance between the material side of life and involvements in meaningful activities, close relationships, and intrinsically enjoyable experiences. Recent studies also suggest that certain forms of consumption may enrich, rather than detract from the quality of people’s lives. “Experiential purchases,” as VanBoven and Gilovich call them, involve spending money on activities that provide new experiences and knowledge, such as vacations, or taking a class to learn a new skill or sport (Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Compared to “material purchases,” motivated by a desire just to own a particular desirable object, experiential purchases were associated with more intrinsic enjoyment and positive social interactions with others. Going out to dinner with friends, touring a museum with your children, and meeting new people by joining a club are all examples of spending money on activities that are enjoyable and that also contribute to important social relationships. Experiential purchases may also have more lasting effects than material purchases because they are a source of good stories and fond memories, even if they were not pleasant at the time (e.g., a “camping trip from hell”).

Chapter Summary Questions

1. a. How do goals connect the “having” and “doing” sides of life?
   b. How did Diener and Fujita’s study of college students’ goals and resources show this connection?
2. How are personal goals both cognitive and emotional-motivational?
3. How do personal goals capture the individualized expressions of more general motives and needs? Give an example.
5. According to Maslow and his hierarchy of human needs, why is it difficult to study for an exam if you have just broken up with your romantic partner?
6. According to the cross-cultural research by Sheldon and his colleagues, what four needs are candidates for universal status?
7. Which of the 10 universal values described by Schwartz are most important in your orientation toward life? Describe and give examples.
8. a. What is the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic goals, and between physical and self-transcendent goals?
   b. How may these dimensions represent a template describing the content of human goals?
9. What are possible selves and how do they represent the “personalization of goal” in self-concept? Explain and give an example.
10. Explain the matching hypothesis and give a supporting research example.
11. How does each of the following explain the matching hypothesis? Self-realization, intrinsic goals, and autonomous motivation.
12. Describe examples of external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic motives/reasons for attending college and their relation to performance and well-being outcomes.
13. a. What four life aspirations were assessed in Kasser and Ryan’s classic study of the dark side of the American dream?
   b. What specific pattern of aspirations was related to lower well-being?
14. How do the following help explain why materialists are unhappy? The content of materialistic goals (what); the motives for their pursuit (why); and psychological insecurity.
15. How are consumer culture and psychological insecurity related to the adoption of materialistic life goals?
16. How do humans defend themselves against the potentially incapacitating fear of death.
   a. According to Ernest Becker?
   b. According to terror management theory?
17. What historical examples and psychological arguments connect money, gold, and materialism to immortality, feelings of security, and the denial of death?
18. Why might teens from affluent families have more drug and emotional problems than their inner-city counterparts? Describe two preliminary explanations for these recent findings.
Key Terms

goals 126  
personal projects 129  
personal strivings 129  
life tasks 129  
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external motives 141  
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terror management theory 147

Web Resources

Personal Projects—Brian Little  
www.brianrlittle.com Site for personal projects and goal researcher Brian Little. Contains research articles and downloadable measures of personal projects.

Self-Determination Theory  
psych.rochester.edu/SDT/publications/pub_well.html Web page covering research of Deci and Ryan at the University of Rochester, focused on goals and motives in relation to self-determination theory.

World Values Survey  
www.worldvaluessurvey.org This site reviews the findings of the on-going studies of the World Values Surveys, a network of social scientists who conduct large-scale national value surveys around the world. Recent survey results, national comparisons, and historical changes are described.

Suggested Readings


