

# G

## Goals

Chen Tang<sup>1</sup> and Yu Yang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,  
Champaign, Illinois, USA

<sup>2</sup>ShanghaiTech University, Shanghai, China

## Synonyms

[Desires](#); [Intentions](#); [Motivators](#); [Motives](#)

## Definition

Goals are internal representations of desired states (Austin and Vancouver 1996). They can be fairly specific (e.g., visiting a relative on a particular day) or abstract (e.g., achieving one's fundamental values). They can be idiosyncratic to the individual (e.g., appreciating a particular course of meal over dinner) or shared across groups of people (e.g., improving one's material wealth).

## Introduction

Goals have been studied intensively by personality psychologists. In the following we first describe representative research identifying the basic kinds of human goals. We then discuss the relations between goals and persons, between goals and situations, and between goals and

behaviors under the framework of personality triad (Funder 2001).

## Basic Kinds of Goals

In one representative study of classifying goals (Chulef et al. 2001), researchers first attempted to generate a list of most important human goals by extensive search in the literature. They considered goals from classic work (e.g., Maslow 1943, 1970; McDougall 1933; Murray 1938) and the ones from more recent research (e.g., Ford and Nichols 1987; Rokeach 1973; Wicker et al. 1984). After much deliberation, these researchers developed a list of 135 goals that they believed to best represent the most important human goals. These goals included ones such as “having others’ trust,” “maintaining religious faith,” and “getting an education.” Next, the whole list of goals were sorted into groups by how similar they were to each other. Cluster analysis identified the following major clusters of the goals: (1) family and marital relationships, and sexual and romantic relationships; (2) being healthy and attractive; (3) interpersonal goals such as those related to having a social life; and (4) intrapersonal goals such as those related to idealism, intellect, and personal growth.

While varied by specific labels and research procedures, studies have identified similar clusters of human goals such as basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy

(Deci and Ryan 2000); core motives of belonging, understanding, controlling, enhancing self, and trusting (Fiske 2014); and fundamental social motive of self-protection, disease avoidance, affiliation, status, mate seeking, mate retention, and kin care (Neel et al. 2016). Research has also shown that individual differences in pursuing different kinds of goals such as these tend to be consistent over time (Dunlop et al. 2015; Roberts et al. 2004), and that the different kinds of goals are related to the Big Five factors of personality traits in systematic ways (Reisz et al. 2013; Roberts and Robins 2000).

## Goals and the Personality Triad

Personality triad refers to the three separable but interconnected elements of persons, situations, and behaviors (Funder 2001, 2006). When it comes to goals and persons, there is a long tradition in personality research showing that persons are fundamentally goal-driven (e.g., Borkeuau 1990; Cantor 1990, 1994; Emmons 1986; Fleeson and Jayawickreme 2015; Fleeson et al. 1995; Grant and Dweck 1999; Little 1983; Klinger 1977; McCabe and Fleeson 2012, 2016; Miller and Read 1987, 1991; Pervin 1982, 1992; Read et al. 1990, 2010; Read and Miller 1989a, b; Yang et al. 2014). People's "personal projects" can be used as a unit of analysis alternative to personality traits (Little 1983; Little et al. 2007). Recently, there is a renewed, and increasingly strong, interest in better understanding the nature of situations (Argyle et al. 1981; Brown et al. 2015; Graham et al. 1980; Miller et al. 1994; Rauthmann 2016; Rauthmann et al. 2014; Reis 2008; Yang et al. 2006, 2009). Yang et al. (2006, 2009), for example, suggested that the essence of a situation is its affordance of human goals and they showed that situations are primarily characterized by two specific principles of goal processes (what happened, is happening, or might happen to people's goals) and goal contents (the specific goals afforded in the situation). Finally, human behaviors can be seen as fundamentally goal-directed (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Madden 1986; Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994; Frese and Sabini 1985; Locke

and Latham 1990; Pervin 1989). Behaviors can be understood as the means by which individuals attain their goals that are afforded in the situation.

According to Funder's conception of the personality triad, knowledge of any of two elements of persons, situations, and behaviors can help us gain understanding of the third (Funder 2001). As can be seen, goals are likely to underlie each and all of these elements. Goals may be the mechanism that explains much of what we know about personality.

## Conclusion

Goals are one of the most well-studied concepts in personality psychology. They are at the core of persons, situations, and behaviors. They represent a strong tradition of research but at the same time, they offer great promise for better understanding and integrating the structures and processes of personality in the future.

## References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179–211.
- Ajzen, I., & Madden, T. J. (1986). Prediction of goal-directed behavior: Attitudes, intentions, and perceived behavioral control. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 22, 453–474.
- Argyle, M., Furnham, A., & Graham, J. A. (1981). *Social situations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, J. T., & Vancouver, J. B. (1996). Goal constructs in psychology: Structure, process, and content. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120, 338–375.
- Bargh, J. A., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (1994). Environmental control of goal-directed action: Automatic and strategic contingencies between situations and behavior. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, 41, 71–124.
- Borkeuau, P. (1990). Traits as ideal-based and goal-derived social categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 381.
- Brown, N. A., Neel, R., & Sherman, R. A. (2015). Measuring the evolutionarily important goals of situations: Situational affordances for adaptive problems. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 13, 1–15.
- Cantor, N. (1990). From thought to behavior: "Having" and "doing" in the study of personality and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 45, 735.

- Cantor, N. (1994). Life task problem solving: Situational affordances and personal needs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *20*, 235–243.
- Chulef, A. S., Read, S. J., & Walsh, D. A. (2001). A hierarchical taxonomy of human goals. *Motivation and Emotion*, *25*, 191–232.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*, 227–268.
- Dunlop, W. L., Bannon, B. L., & McAdams, D. P. (2015). Studying the motivated agent through time: Personal goal development during the adult life span. *Journal of Personality*. doi:10.1111/jopy.12234.
- Emmons, R. A. (1986). Personal strivings: An approach to personality and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 1058–1068.
- Fiske, S. T. (2014). *Social beings: Core motives in social psychology*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Fleeson, W., & Jayawickreme, E. (2015). Whole trait theory. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *56*, 82–92.
- Fleeson, W., Zirkel, S., & Smith, E. E. (1995). Mental representations of trait categories and their influences on person perception. *Social Cognition*, *13*, 365–397.
- Ford, M. E., & Nichols, C. W. (1987). A taxonomy of human goals and some possible applications. In M. E. Ford & D. H. Ford (Eds.), *Humans as self-constructing systems: Putting the framework to work*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Frese, M., & Sabini, J. (Eds.). (1985). *Goal directed behavior: The concept of action in psychology*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Funder, D. C. (2001). Personality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*, 197–221.
- Funder, D. C. (2006). Towards a resolution of the personality triad: Persons, situations, and behaviors. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*, 21–34.
- Graham, J. A., Argyle, M., & Furnham, A. (1980). The goal structure of situations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *10*, 345–366.
- Grant, H., & Dweck, C. (1999). A goal analysis of personality and personality coherence. In D. Cervone & Y. Shoda (Eds.), *The coherence of personality: Social-cognitive bases of consistency, variability, and organization* (pp. 345–371). New York: Guilford Press.
- Klinger, E. (1977). *Meaning and void: Inner experience and the incentives in people's lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Little, B. R. (1983). Personal projects: A rationale and method for investigation. *Environment and Behavior*, *15*, 273–309.
- Little, B. R., Salmela-Aro, K. E., & Phillips, S. D. (2007). *Personal project pursuit: Goals, action, and human flourishing*. Chicago: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1990). *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*, 370–396.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- McCabe, K. O., & Fleeson, W. (2012). What is extraversion for? Integrating trait and motivational perspectives and identifying the purpose of extraversion. *Psychological Science*, *23*, 1498–1505.
- McCabe, K. O., & Fleeson, W. (2016). Are traits useful? Explaining trait manifestations as tools in the pursuit of goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *110*, 287–301.
- McDougall, W. (1933). *The energies of men*. New York: Scribner's.
- Miller, L. C., & Read, S. J. (1987). Why am I telling you this? Self-disclosure in a goal-based model of personality. In V. Derlega & J. Berg (Eds.), *Self-disclosure: Theory, research, and therapy* (pp. 35–58). New York: Plenum.
- Miller, L. C., & Read, S. J. (1991). Inter-personalism: Understanding persons in relationships. In W. H. Jones & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships: A research annual* (Vol. 2, pp. 233–267). Oxford, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Miller, L. C., Cody, M. J., & McLaughlin, M. L. (1994). Situations and goals as fundamental constructs in interpersonal communication research. In M. L. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (pp. 162–198). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Murray, H. A. (1938). *Explorations in personality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Neel, R., Kenrick, D. T., White, A. E., & Neuberg, S. L. (2016). Individual differences in fundamental social motives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *110*, 887–907.
- Pervin, L. A. (Ed.). (1989). *Goal concepts in personality and social psychology*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Pervin, L. A. (1982). The stasis and flow of behavior: Toward a theory of goals. In *Nebraska symposium on motivation* (pp. 1–53). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Pervin, L. A. (1992). Transversing the individual-environment landscape: A personal odyssey. In W. B. Walsh & K. H. Craik (Eds.), *Person-environment psychology: Models and perspectives* (pp. 71–87). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rauthmann, J. F. (2016). Motivational factors in the perception of psychological situation characteristics. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *10*, 92–108.
- Rauthmann, J. F., Gallardo-Pujol, D., Guillaume, E. M., Todd, E., Nave, C. S., Sherman, R. A., et al. (2014). The situational eight DIAMONDS: A taxonomy of major dimensions of situation characteristics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *107*, 677–718.
- Read, S. J., & Miller, L. C. (1989a). Inter-personalism: Toward a goal-based theory of persons in relationships. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), *Goal concepts in personality and social psychology* (pp. 413–472). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Read, S. J., & Miller, L. C. (1989b). The importance of goals in personality: Toward a coherent model of persons. In R. S. Wyer Jr. & T. K. Srull (Eds.), *Social intelligence and cognitive assessments of personality: Advances in social cognition* (Vol. 2, pp. 163–174). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Read, S. J., Jones, D. K., & Miller, L. C. (1990). Traits as goal-based categories: The importance of goals in the coherence of dispositional categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *58*, 1048.
- Read, S. J., Monroe, B. M., Brownstein, A. L., Yang, Y., Chopra, G., & Miller, L. C. (2010). A neural network model of the structure and dynamics of human personality. *Psychological Review*, *117*, 61–92.
- Reis, H. T. (2008). Reinvigorating the concept of situation in social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *12*, 311–329.
- Reisz, Z., Boudreaux, M. J., & Ozer, D. J. (2013). Personality traits and the prediction of personal goals. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *55*, 699–704.
- Roberts, B. W., & Robins, R. W. (2000). Broad dispositions, broad aspirations: The intersection of personality traits and major life goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *26*, 1284–1296.
- Roberts, B. W., O'donnell, M., & Robins, R. W. (2004). Goal and personality trait development in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*, 541–550.
- Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. New York: Free Press.
- Wicker, F. W., Lambert, F. B., Richardson, F. C., & Kahler, J. (1984). Categorical goal hierarchies and classification of human motives. *Journal of Personality*, *52*, 285–305.
- Yang, Y., Read, S. J., & Miller, L. C. (2006). A taxonomy of situations from Chinese idioms. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*, 750–778.
- Yang, Y., Read, S. J., & Miller, L. C. (2009). The concept of situations. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *3*, 1018–1037.
- Yang, Y., Read, S. J., Denson, T. F., Xu, Y., Zhang, J., & Pedersen, W. C. (2014). The key ingredients of personality traits: Situations, behaviors, and explanations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *40*, 79–91.