


Teaching About Values and Goals: Applications of the Circumplex Model to Motivation, Well-Being, and Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

In this article, I review how people organize values and goals in their minds and I suggest teaching demonstrations, exercises, and assignments to help students learn this material. I pay special attention to circumplex models, which represent the extent of conflict or compatibility between values and goals, and to the well-researched distinction between intrinsic (e.g., self-acceptance and community feeling) and extrinsic (e.g., financial success and image) goals. I also provide a brief overview of the literature regarding how both a dispositional focus on goals and the momentary activation of goals relate to people's personal well-being and to their prosocial and proenvironmental attitudes and behavior. Finally, I discuss implications for students' experiences with advertising messages in their day-to-day lives.

Keywords

values, goals, prosocial behavior, circumplex model

Since the early 1970s, researchers in psychology have made substantial progress in understanding the human value and goal system. Although values and goals have their differences,¹ both constructs concern what people believe to be important, what they conceive of as ideal, and what they want to strive for and bring about in their lives (Emmons, 1989; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). On the surface, it may seem as though people could care about innumerable values and goals, but substantial cross-cultural research has made it clear that there are about a dozen basic aims in life that individuals typically deem as important to them (Grouzet et al., 2005; Schwartz, 1992). More importantly for the purposes of this article, these aims seem to be organized in people's minds in a dynamic fashion that can be represented statistically via a *circumplex* model. Not only do these circumplex organizations provide a visually compelling way of explaining how people experience their values and goals, but these models also generate a number of interesting hypotheses that have been widely tested and that teachers can use in classroom lectures and demonstrations.

Figure 1 presents a circumplex model of goals that is based on the reports of approximately 1,800 college students from 15 nations around the world (Grouzet et al., 2005). In this study, the students rated the importance of over 50 specific goals (e.g., "I will feel free," "I will keep up with fashions in clothing and hair"). The researchers then submitted these ratings to statistical techniques, including factor analysis, multidimensional scaling, and circular stochastic modeling, in order to

understand how the students experienced the interrelationships among these aims.

The circumplex organization that resulted from these analyses represents the fact that certain values and goals are psychologically compatible with each other, whereas other values and goals tend to stand in psychological conflict with each other. Compatible goals are adjacent to each other on the circumplex, representing the fact that they are experienced as relatively easy to pursue simultaneously. For example, looking at the west portion of the circumplex in Figure 1, the goals of popularity and image are next to each other, separated by only 9 degrees (out of a possible 360) in circular stochastic modeling analyses; the compatibility of these goals is quite intuitive, given that people typically pursue image goals (like having clothes, cars, or homes of a certain sort) in order to impress other people and obtain their approval (i.e., pursue popularity goals). In contrast, goals that are in psychological conflict fall on opposite ends of the circumplex, representing the relative difficulty people often experience in simultaneously pursuing them. For example, spirituality lies at the north end of the

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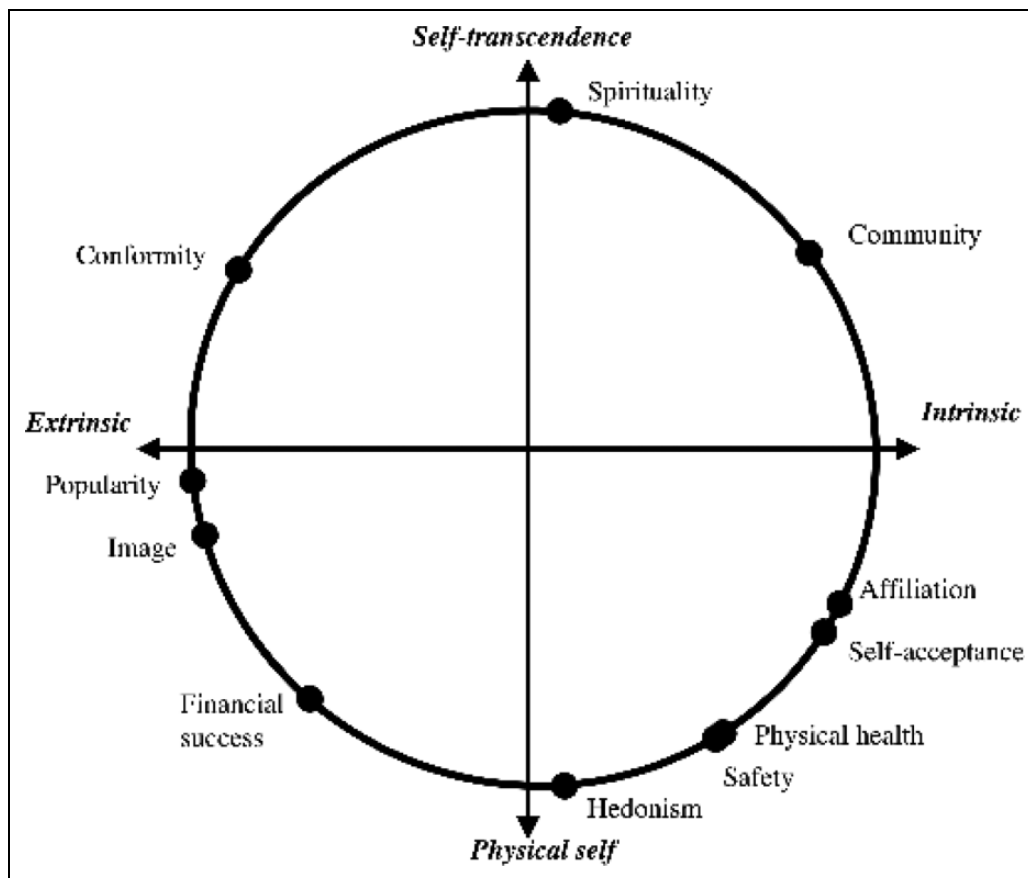


Figure 1. Shows the circumplex model of goals (Grouzet et al., 2005; reprinted with permission of the American Psychological Association).

circumplex, whereas hedonism lies at the south end (separated by 189 degrees, with 180 degrees representing perfect opposition); again, this makes intuitive sense, given the many religious beliefs stating that it is quite difficult to pursue a life of the spirit while also focusing on sensual pleasures. Another example of conflict concerns pursuing financial success (obtaining a lot of money and possessions) and community feeling (contributing to the betterment of society); these goals are 192 degrees from each other, showing that it is relatively difficult to be simultaneously greedy and generous.

Although there is much to say about the circumplex, in this essay, I will focus primarily on the difference between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* goals, a distinction first made by Kasser and Ryan (1996). Intrinsic goals (on the east side of the circumplex) include aims for community feeling, self-acceptance, and affiliation; theoretically, these goals are usually inherently satisfying to pursue because they fulfill psychological needs that some theories suggest are universal (e.g., Self-determination Theory, Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such goals have been described by many psychological traditions, particularly humanistic/existential ones (Fromm, 1976; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961), play an important part in many aspects of American culture (e.g., the pursuit of freedom and of family values), and are basic to the mores of many religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam). In contrast, extrinsic goals (in the

western portion of the circumplex) include aims for image, popularity, and financial success. These goals tend to be focused on the praise and rewards that come from other people; further, people usually pursue extrinsic goals as means to some other end (e.g., they want to be attractive so someone will love them). Extrinsic goals have also been present throughout history, as numerous religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Plato and Taoism) have long warned against a focus on such aims, despite the fact that contemporary consumer culture largely celebrates and encourages such goals and values.

Dispositional Correlates of an Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Orientation

With regard to the functioning of particular individuals, one can view the circumplex in two distinct ways. The first is at the *dispositional* level—how much a person generally prioritizes different types of values. To demonstrate the dispositional applications of the circumplex (which is the one that listeners typically gravitate toward anyhow), I ask people to think for a moment about someone they know who cares a great deal about his or her own image, someone who cares a lot about contributing to the community, and someone for whom spirituality goals are particularly important. Listeners usually are able to bring such individuals to mind relatively easily.

An analogy I have found quite useful in lecturing on dispositional value orientations is that of the “value pie.” I suggest that listeners imagine each value in the circumplex as being like a piece of pie, where everyone has a slice for spirituality, another slice for image, another for affiliation, and so on. What the dispositional approach to values and goals does is to assess how big each slice of pie is for each individual, relative to all other slices of the pie. As such, people who care little about, for example, spirituality only have a sliver of their value pie devoted to such aims, whereas someone who cares a great deal about that aim will have quite a big slice. The relative size of the slice will then influence what people try to do with their lives and the experiences they are likely to have. For example, on a Saturday afternoon, a student cannot engage in wild partying with his or her friends and also do volunteer work at the local food pantry; all other things being equal, the relative importance of hedonistic versus community values (i.e., the relative size of the slices of those values in the overall pie) will determine which behavior the person pursues.

As I just suggested, values and goals are among the personality variables that influence people’s attitudes towards particular objects they encounter in the world and toward their specific behaviors (Feather, 1992, 1995). The logical consequence of this idea is that people who differentially prioritize intrinsic versus extrinsic goals will have different experiences in life, experiences that are relevant to their personal well-being and to the way they treat others and the Earth. A helpful teaching tool that quickly summarizes in a fun and accessible way some of this body of research (and some of its implications) is a 5-min animated video I made with the help of the nonprofit organization, Center for a New American Dream (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGab38pKscw>). In the paragraphs below, I provide a brief textual overview of some of these findings.

The earliest research regarding people’s relative prioritization of intrinsic versus extrinsic goals focused on people’s personal well-being. Over the last two decades, the evidence has accumulated to show that organizing one’s life primarily around intrinsic goals (i.e., having bigger slices of the value pie dedicated to personal growth, affiliation, and community feeling) is associated with higher well-being and lower distress. In contrast, “buying into” the extrinsic goals of money, image, and status that consumer culture encourages is actually associated with *lower* well-being and *greater* distress (see Kasser, 2002, 2011a, for reviews). Researchers have replicated these results using many different methods of assessing people’s personal goals (including responses to experimenter-generated goals, subjects’ generation of their own goals, and implicit measures of goal orientation) and of assessing people’s personal well-being (including measures of happiness, life satisfaction, vitality, positive affect, depression, anxiety, substance use, and negative affect). These findings have also been replicated in numerous cultures around the world, including wealthy and poor nations. The results are also robust across participant characteristics including age, gender, income, and whether or not one is in the field of business.

A second, more recent stream of research has investigated how a relative focus on intrinsic versus extrinsic goals influences the way people treat each other and the Earth (see Kasser, 2011a, for a review). Studies show, for example, that people who are dispositionally oriented toward extrinsic goals report lower levels of empathy, less frequent engagement in prosocial behaviors (such as helping and sharing), and more frequent engagement in antisocial behaviors (such as stealing, cheating, and unethical business behaviors). When placed in Prisoner’s Dilemma Games with their friends, extrinsically oriented individuals also tend to make more competitive choices that benefit themselves while hurting their friends; intrinsically oriented people, in contrast, cooperate more (Sheldon, Sheldon, & Osbaldiston, 2000). Further, extrinsic values are associated with stronger prejudicial, racist, and social dominance beliefs (Duriez, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & De Witte, 2007), belying a sense that one’s own group is better than others; intrinsic values, conversely, are associated with more egalitarian viewpoints. These effects carry over into the way individuals treat the limited resources Earth provides. Compared to people who place more emphasis on intrinsic goals, those who focus on extrinsic goals espouse less positive ecological attitudes, act in more greedy and less sustainable ways in resource dilemma games, and pursue lifestyle choices around food, transportation, and housing that ultimately use more limited resources (i.e., they have higher ecological/carbon footprints; see Cropp-ton & Kasser, 2009, for a review).

Before moving on to review other research, I should emphasize a common misconception regarding this research literature that teachers may want to dispel. Many readers and listeners, and even a few psychologists, take from this literature the idea that problematic outcomes associated with an extrinsic orientation occur only when extrinsic values are prioritized as *higher than* intrinsic values. Actually, in my experience, it is quite rare to find people who report such a value orientation—intrinsic goals are usually reported as being especially important to most individuals (which is good news!). The well-being, social, and ecological problems I reviewed above seem to occur as extrinsic goals become more important to a person, even if those goals are not actually the *most* important. Going back to the value pie analogy, as the extrinsic slices increase in size, other slices must necessarily decrease in size; given the organization of the circumplex, the slices likely to be “crowded out” are the intrinsic aims that are known to promote well-being and prosocial and ecologically sustainable behavior. As such, even moderate valuing of extrinsic goals can be problematic.

Activating Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Orientations

I noted above that the dispositional approach is only one of two ways to apply the circumplex model to individual people.² Although people care about certain goals more than others as they go through their lives, a basic premise of the theory behind this and other circumplex models (e.g., Schwartz, 1992) is that each of us has *each* of these goals as part of our motivational

system. To demonstrate this, I ask listeners to imagine a time in the last 2 weeks when they were pursuing community goals, another time when they were pursuing affiliation goals, and, uncomfortable as it might be to recall, a time when they were pursuing image or popularity goals. As with the dispositional exercise, listeners usually have little trouble bringing to mind such instances and quickly grasp that everyone has each of these types of goals.

If everyone has these goals, then each of the goals can be temporarily activated. Moreover, if a goal can be temporarily activated, then it should affect people's attitudes and behaviors, at least in the short term. Most fascinatingly (at least to me), the patterns of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that occur after activating a particular goal follow the dynamics of the value circumplex and parallel the results that occur at the dispositional level.

Bauer, Wilkie, Kim, and Bodenhausen (2012) recently demonstrated some of these dynamics for well-being. In one of their studies, Bauer et al. had participants view either two dozen luxury consumer items (e.g., cars, clothing, and jewelry) or scenes lacking any consumer products; the former condition had been shown in a pilot study to activate materialistic, extrinsic goals. Afterwards, participants completed the widely used positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Parallel to well-being results at the dispositional level, this brief activation of extrinsic goals led participants to report higher levels of depressive and anxious emotions. Such findings suggest that even thinking momentarily about extrinsic goals may be sufficient to lower people's well-being, at least temporarily (although see Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004, for null results with a similar procedure).

Other research on the social and ecological outcomes associated with the activation of intrinsic and extrinsic goals brings these dynamics into even fuller relief. Recall that the circumplex is organized so that compatible goals, which are relatively easy to pursue simultaneously, are adjacent to each other. In contrast, conflicting goals, which are relatively difficult to pursue simultaneously, are on opposite sides of the circumplex. As Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, and Rees (2009) first showed, this organization implies that brief activations of one value should "bleed over" and activate other compatible goals. Bauer et al. (2012) demonstrated this as well, showing that merely referring to study participants as "consumers" rather than "citizens" led the former group to form more positive automatic evaluations of extrinsic values such as "wealth," "image," and "success."

At the same time, the circumplex organization suggests that "suppression" or "seesaw" effects will also occur—brief activations of one value will cause values on the opposite side of the circumplex to become less dominant, at least temporarily. For example, if people's financial goals are activated, then their concern with community feeling values should diminish, given the conflict between those types of goals. One of the first pieces of evidence consistent with this prediction came from the work of Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006). These investigators briefly primed thoughts of money (or neutral, control topics) through typical social-cognitive methods such as word scrambles

(e.g., unscrambling the words "salary high a paying" to form a meaningful phrase) and exposure to financial images (e.g., a screen saver with floating \$ signs). After exposure to these materialistic (or control) primes, participants had the opportunity to behave in prosocial ways by, for example, volunteering their time for future studies, helping an experimenter pick up pencils that had been dropped on the floor, or donating money to a university student fund. Across the studies, results consistently demonstrated that brief exposures to money-related words and images led to less prosocial behavior than did exposure to neutral words and images. These findings are consistent with predictions derived from the circumplex: Exposure to money symbols activates financial success goals and values and, given the seesaw effect, community feeling goals are suppressed, leading to declines in prosocial behavior.

Bleed-over and seesaw effects have also been demonstrated with regard to ecological outcomes. For example, Sheldon, Nichols, and Kasser (2011) had college students think about their identity as a human, as a college student, or as an American. Participants who thought about their American identity were actually divided into three types—those who were free to think whatever came to their mind about America, those who were asked to consider the intrinsic values associated with America (e.g., freedom and family values), or those who were asked to consider the extrinsic values associated with America (e.g., making money and becoming famous). After this priming exercise, participants were asked to imagine that they were consultants to the US government who had to make recommendations regarding the ecologically relevant behavior of the average American in terms of the size one's house should be, the gas mileage one's car should get, and so on. Despite the fact that ecological issues had not been mentioned in any of the experimental conditions, participants who thought about the intrinsic aspects of being American made significantly more ecologically sustainable policy recommendations. This result probably is due to both a bleed-over effect (i.e., thinking about intrinsic values activated aims associated with having a sustainable world) and a suppression effect (i.e., thinking about intrinsic values suppressed the extrinsic values that typically drive high levels of ecologically damaging consumption behaviors).

Another example that drives home the point of activation is a study by Chilton, Crompton, Kasser, Maio, and Nolan (2012). These experimenters hoped to demonstrate that intrinsic values can be activated even among people with very strong dispositional orientations towards extrinsic values. To this end, Chilton et al. surveyed over 300 adults from the United Kingdom with regard to their values; they then selected participants whose scores on extrinsically oriented values placed them in the top 10% of the sample. These participants (all of whom were dispositionally high on extrinsically oriented values) then completed a brief exercise in which they wrote about the importance of extrinsic values (for popularity, preserving one's public image, and wealth) or intrinsic values (for acceptance, affiliation, and being broad-minded). All participants then underwent a standardized interview asking them about social issues and ecological issues. A linguist naive to the

experimental hypotheses and to the priming conditions then analyzed the interviews. Chilton et al. found that even among these highly extrinsically oriented individuals, briefly thinking about intrinsic values affected their expressed attitudes about social and ecological issues. Specifically, compared to those primed with extrinsic values, those primed with intrinsic values were more likely to say that these social and ecological issues were important and should be addressed. Actual quotes from the participants bring these results to life. For example, with regard to childhood mortality in developing nations, a person who scored high in extrinsic values and was primed with extrinsic values said, "It's a part of life over there . . . It's the way of life, that's what happens, so it's nothing to get too upset about." In contrast, another participant who also scored high in extrinsic values but who had been primed with intrinsic values said, "It's really unfair the injustice of how some people have loads and other people have absolutely nothing and, yeah, it's terrible." Clearly, intrinsic values had been activated in this second individual, and this activation generalized (or bled over) to affect that person's expressions of concern about children dying in other nations.

Advertising and Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Goals

Advertising is one way that values are often momentarily activated in students' everyday lives. As people's lives unfold in contemporary society, they frequently encounter multiple, highly sophisticated messages on television, the radio, and the Internet (as well as while reading print media and walking through public spaces) that encourage them to purchase goods and services that will help them convey a certain image, be popular, be loved, be healthy, and so on. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that exposure to such commercial messages increases people's dispositional orientation toward extrinsic values. For example, US and UK youth and college students who watch more television (and thus ingest more advertising) are more materialistic, which in turn predicts lower levels of well-being (Schor, 2004) and less concern for the environment (Good, 2007). Other research has shown that increases in advertising expenditures in the United States in a given year predicted increases in materialistic values among US high school seniors from the mid-1970s through 2007 (Twenge & Kasser, 2013).

Teachers can demonstrate the influence of advertising at the level of value activation via a "media fast" assignment (see Ferguson & Kasser, 2012, for further details). Ferguson and Kasser reported initial results from a sample of 15 students who did their best to avoid all commercial messages for 1 week. This is, of course, an impossible task (which is a worthwhile discussion in its own right), but students who took the project seriously not only stopped watching commercial television and listening to commercial radio, but they also disconnected from Facebook and other commercialized forms of social media, took down posters of celebrities that were hanging in their rooms, and stopped wearing branded clothing. Most interesting

for the present purposes, students not only reported that they had disconnected from the values of consumer culture, but that they had, at least temporarily, reoriented their lives around what I would call intrinsic values. Specifically, many of the students reported that while on the media fast, they found more time to sleep (a health goal), pursue creative activities like drawing and playing musical instruments (a personal growth goal), and engage in face-to-face interactions (an affiliation goal). One student summed up his experience by saying, "Media promotes the idea that we will be more connected and happier if we spend more time interacting with it . . . I found the opposite experience. I consumed less media and [had] more personal experiences" (Ferguson & Kasser, 2012, p. 146). These admittedly preliminary findings again fit the circumplex model quite well: By decreasing their exposure to advertising, students had their extrinsic values activated less frequently. Given the seesaw effect, intrinsic values therefore grew in prominence.

Conclusion

Space limitations preclude a full explanation of other dynamics relevant to the circumplex, but I will briefly allude to three other topics for those who may be interested in knowing more. First, growing evidence supports the long-standing theoretical claim (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kasser, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1996) that pursuing intrinsic goals does a relatively good job of satisfying people's psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn explains why these goals are associated with higher levels of psychological well-being (see, e.g., Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Teachers could facilitate class discussions or assign reflection papers in which students explore how intrinsic goals help them feel autonomous, competent, and related while extrinsic goals interfere with those aims. Second, substantial evidence also supports the proposition that feelings of threat and insecurity lead people to orient away from intrinsic goals and toward extrinsic goals (see, e.g., Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Studies have demonstrated such shifts toward extrinsic goals and away from intrinsic goals at both the dispositional level (e.g., having divorced or nonnurturant parents or growing up in poverty) and at the activation level (e.g., thinking about being poor or about one's own death). My experience is that students enjoy the opportunity to dig into discussions on how these deeper, more psychodynamic issues may influence their values. Third, both theory (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007) and some evidence (Kasser, 2011b; Schwartz, 2007) suggest that capitalist economic systems that focus on competition, economic growth, and the free market encourage citizens to prioritize extrinsic values and to suppress intrinsic values, whereas economic systems more focused on cooperation and governmental regulation have the opposite effects. Presenting such work provides the opportunity to have broader discussions relevant to cultural psychology.

Regardless of which angle a teacher may take in discussing this material, I hope this brief overview demonstrates that

psychological research on values and goals has made significant strides over the last few decades, that it connects with numerous subdisciplines and theories in the field, and that it opens up the possibility of numerous discussions and assignments that touch on topics of interest to many 21st-century students.

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Notes

1. Values are generally understood to be abstract, cognitive representations of what people believe to be important or ideal, either in their own lives or in the world at large. Goals, in contrast, are more motivational in nature, concerning the actual aims a person is attempting to bring about in his or her own life. Emmons (1989) suggested that, hierarchically speaking, values organize goals, so that a single conception of the ideal (e.g., to grow as a person) could lead to several specific goals (e.g., to enter psychotherapy, to meditate, to ask friends to comment on one's weaknesses, and to keep a reflective journal). I use values and goals more or less interchangeably in this essay, because most of the work on goals reviewed here concerns ratings of how important goals are (i.e., how much they are valued by a participant).
2. Some work has also applied circumplex models to the values of entire cultures (see Kasser, 2011c; Schwartz, 2006, for information on this approach).

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