

## **Does family structure matter? Comparing the life goals and aspirations of learners in secondary schools**

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*The aim of this study was to compare the goals and aspirations of learners from single- and two-parent families. The study used a quantitative methodology with a cross-sectional comparative group design. The sample consisted of 853 Grade 11 learners from secondary schools in the Northern, Southern and Metro Central education districts in the Western Cape. The data were collected using the Aspirations Index and a short biographical questionnaire. The results suggest that there was a significant main effect of family structure on certain goals and aspirations of learners in secondary schools. These goals and aspirations included wealth, image, personal growth, relationships, and health. Furthermore, learners in single-parent families placed more emphasis on intrinsic goals.*

**Keywords:** aspirations; environment; extrinsic goals; family structure; intrinsic goals; learners; secondary school; self-determination theory; single-parent families; two-parent families

### **Introduction**

The National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (Department of Education, 2003; Jacobs, 2011) stipulates that goal-setting, decision-making and career counselling are part of the school curriculum, and form part of the syllabus that is taught at schools. What motivates South African learners and why they are motivated, to set and aspire to specific goals, are not clearly articulated. Learners may be motivated by society (such as poverty in the family) and the media (role models such as successful singers) to aspire to being wealthy and famous (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). The pursuit of or motivation towards certain goals and aspirations has implications for the individual and for society. For example, the pursuit of wealth and fame could have long-term implications for the well-being of the individual as well as societal interrelationships.

When people speak about living a happy and purposeful life which has meaning, very often they are referring to their goals in life and their aspirations for the future (Ingrid, Majda & Dubravka, 2009). These are known as 'life goals'. It is believed that discussions and thoughts about the future and goals assist in giving one's life some sort of structure and meaning. Goal setting is believed to be important with regard to satisfaction with life and well-being (Frisch, 1998). The long-term goals of individuals direct the activities that people are involved in and become involved in throughout their lifespan (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Research suggests that setting life goals is important, as this has implications for the future of young people (Carroll, Hattie, Durkin &

Houghton, 2001; Carroll, Durkin, Hattie & Houghton, 1997). For example, the goals of a group of incarcerated youth revolved around the attainment of resources, enjoyment and fun, as well as participation in sport. Similarly, delinquency was found to be related to the goal of social image (Carroll et al., 2001; Carroll et al., 1997).

As a theory of motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) specifies that individuals are inherently motivated to (1) function at their fullest potential, (2) work towards a cohesive sense of self, and (3) be self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2004). According to SDT, individuals can either be motivated intrinsically or extrinsically in formulating the content of their goals and aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic goals are thought to be associated with behaviour and actions that can be explained as being 'self-determined'. Behaviour and actions that are experienced as being 'externally controlled' would be extrinsic goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; McHoskey, 1999). Intrinsic life goals include personal growth, community contributions and meaningful relationships (Ingrid et al., 2009; McHoskey, 1999; Williams, Cox, Hedberg & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic life goals include wealth, fame and image (Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008). Research studies have found that the perceived accomplishment of intrinsic goals is associated with greater well-being, happiness and life satisfaction (Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003; Ryan, Chirkov, Little, Sheldon, Timoshina & Deci, 1999; Sheldon, Gunz, Nichols & Ferguson, 2010). Although research suggests that extrinsic goals and aspirations eventually result in less well-being, there are studies which suggest an alternative view (Ingrid et al., 2009; Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). For example, when people are under psychological 'threat', such as unemployment or the possibility of dying, they may pursue extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals and aspirations. Thus, the well-being of an individual is dependent on the agreement between the personal and contextual factors in the person's life, where the aim is to pursue endeavours that are of utmost importance (Little, 2007). The family, as a contextual factor, plays a hugely significant role in the socialisation of children, offering support and 'nutriments' towards being motivated or goal orientated (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Haivas, Hofmans & Pepermans, 2012; Hungerford & Cox, 2006). In a supportive role, families may enhance the pursuit of goals and aspirations of youth, but families may also hinder the process.

Currently, approximately 35% of South African children are reared in a household with both parents present, while 40% are reared by their mothers and 2.8% by their fathers (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). The average South African child, is reared in a single-parent household, usually headed by a mother (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Ellis & Adams, 2009) and over half of all children under the age of 18 will spend some time in a single-parent household (Magnuson & Berger, 2009). The structure of the family has drawn tremendous interest in research for decades, and what has been of particular interest is the effect of family structure on human development and well-being (Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Theron & Dunn, 2010). Specifically, the debate regarding the effects of being raised in a single-parent household as compared to being raised in a two-parent household continues to occupy centre stage.

Typically, single parents are often presented in research studies as being female, living in a low socio-economic environment, being socially isolated, having lower emotional and parental support, and working longer hours than their two-parent counterparts (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang & Glassman, 2000; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Subsequently, children raised in single-parent families have less parental observation and supervision than children who are reared in married families and are often considered at-risk (Magnuson & Berger, 2009). In comparison, two-parent families seem to have higher socio-economic status (Rosenfeld, 2010), and are seen as being more 'attractive' as each member in the family brings his/her own resources that are used together and therefore a more equitable division of labour exists within the household (Stoleru, Radu, Antal & Szigeti, 2011). Furthermore, children from two-parent families tend to be better adjusted than children from other family structures (Goodman & Greaves, 2010; Musick & Meier, 2010; Waldfogel, Craigie & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Roman (2011) suggests that very often there is a perception, albeit a misleading one, that coming from a two-parent family, provides a more 'stable environment' than a single-parent family. Thus, while it is believed that family structure plays an important role in children's attainment of their goals and aspirations for the future (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000), research findings remain contradictory. Some studies reveal that children reared in single-parent families have low economic, educational and employment attainment in comparison to children reared in two-parent families (Malmberg, Ehrman and Lithén, 2005; Mueller & Cooper, 1986; Richards & Schmiege, 1993). In addition these studies report higher levels of achievement for those from two-parent families than those from single-parent families (Magnuson & Berger, 2009). The challenge is often that single-parent families are more at-risk than their two-parent counterparts because of the availability of resources, which ultimately affects children. Other studies, however, find no significant differences for the goal pursuits of youth who have been raised in single- or two-parent families (Carroll et al., 2001). In a country such as South Africa, where many people live in low socio-economic environments, young people could be more inclined to pursue extrinsic goals and aspirations, which could ultimately have implications at different levels of society.

In the field of goals and aspirations, research has provided sufficient evidence regarding the content of these in young people (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While this research has been conducted cross-culturally (Grouzet, Kasser, Ahuvia, Dols, Kim, Lau, Ryan, Saunders, Schmuck & Sheldon, 2005), it has not previously been studied in South Africa. It is evident that the pursuit of specific goals and aspirations could have both negative and positive implications for the future well-being and functioning of individuals, communities and societies. The question that persists, however, pertains to the salient role of family structure in the pursuit of goals and aspirations of South African learners. In this study we were interested to (1) determine the life goal content of learners in secondary schools and (2) compare the goals and aspirations of learners in secondary schools who were being raised in single and two-parent families. We

specifically chose Grade 11 learners as we assumed that they would be focusing on future goals, being quite close to completing their school careers.

### Method

A cross-sectional comparative group design was used to identify the life goals of learners in secondary schools, and compare the goals and aspirations of learners who were raised in single- and two-parent families.

### Participants

In order to obtain a more heterogeneous group of participants, three schools were randomly selected from each district, based on socio-economic status. The Western Cape Education Department granted permission to conduct the study. The principals and teachers then granted permission for the study to be conducted at their schools. Grade 11 learners were invited to participate, based on informed consent by their parents. Participants could voluntarily participate only if they were given informed consent. No names were used at any time during the data collection process, and in this way they were assured their information would remain anonymous and confidential. Participants were also given the opportunity not to participate and to withdraw at any time during the research process without consequence.

The final sample consisted of 853 participants from schools within the Northern, Metro Central and Southern Districts, respectively (see Table 1). The final sample consisted of 42.7% males and 57.0% females. Of the participants, 59.9% lived in two-parent families while 39.4% lived in single-parent families. The mean age for participants was 16.96 ( $SD = 1.04$ ).

**Table 1** Demographic details of participants

		Total Sample	Single	Married
Gender	Male	364 (42.7%)	126 (40.5%)	237 (44.1%)
	Female	486 (57.0%)	182 (58.5%)	301 (55.9%)
Age	Mean age	16.96	16.98	16.94
	<i>SD</i>	1.04	1.24	.91
School District	Central	332 (38.9%)	91 (29.3%)	240 (44.6%)
	Southern	257 (30.1%)	125 (40.2%)	132 (24.5%)
	Northern	264 (30.9%)	95 (30.5%)	166 (30.9%)
Family structure			311 (36.6%)	538 (63.4%)

### Measuring instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: (i) demographic details of participants

(such as age, gender, race, home language and whether the participants came from single- or two-parent families) and (ii) the *Aspirations Index* (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) which determines the content of participants' life goals and aspirations. The Index consisted of seven goal and aspiration categories. These life goals are categorised as intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. The participants rated their aspirations on three different levels, namely, (1) the importance to themselves of each aspiration, (2) their beliefs about the likelihood of attaining each, and (3) the degree to which they had already attained each. An example of the items was: Life-goal: To be a very wealthy person. 1. How important is this to you? 2 How likely is it that this will happen in your future?, 3. How much have you already attained this goal? In this study the participants were only asked to respond to 1 and 2, on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not very important/likely to 4 = very important/likely. The seventh life goal of health could be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Table 2 indicates the Cronbach alpha scores for the variables in the Aspirations Index. All the Cronbach alpha scores were higher than .75, which is considered acceptable (Anastasi, 1982).

**Table 2** Cronbach alpha scores – Aspirations Index

Variable	$\alpha$
Wealth	.90
Fame	.94
Image	.96
Personal growth	.96
Relationship	.96
Community	.92
Health	.94
Intrinsic goals	.91
Extrinsic goals	.89

### Data analysis

Groups of single- and two-parent families were created, based on recoding the variables. The sub-scales for wealth, fame, image, personal growth, relationships, community and health were formed using the mean scores of the importance responses and likelihood responses of the various life goals. The subscale of Extrinsic Life Goals was created by using the mean scores of wealth, fame and image. The subscale of Intrinsic Life Goals was created using the mean scores of personal growth, relationships and community. The subscale of health was not included in the formulation of the Extrinsic and Intrinsic Life Goals as the goal of health could be seen as being both extrinsic and intrinsic. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to compare the different groups. It allowed for more than one dependent variable to be measured. Once a significant multivariate difference was found, a follow-up was conducted with

a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Field, 2009). These group differences were based on the learners' perspectives.

## Results

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the content of the life goals and aspirations for the total sample, single and two-parent groups. The highest mean score was attained for the life goal of community ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .41$ ). This was similar for single ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = .38$ ) and two-parent groups ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .42$ ). In terms of the subscales of intrinsic and extrinsic life goals, the majority of participants scored higher for extrinsic life goals and aspirations ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .36$ ) than intrinsic life goals and aspirations ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = .45$ ). The highest score for extrinsic life goals and aspirations was for wealth ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .38$ ). This was similar for single ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .35$ ) and two-parent families ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). The results show that participants raised in single-parent families had slightly higher mean scores across all life goals and aspirations than two-parent families.

**Table 3** Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goal Content

Items	Total sample			Single parents			Two parents		
	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Wealth	851	3.35	.38	310	3.39	.35	537	3.33	.39
Fame	852	3.17	.49	311	3.16	.49	537	3.17	.48
Image	851	3.24	.54	311	3.29	.50	536	3.20	.55
Personal Growth	852	2.62	.60	311	2.70	.59	537	2.57	.60
Relationships	852	2.43	.64	311	2.51	.64	537	2.39	.63
Community	852	3.44	.41	311	3.47	.38	537	3.42	.42
Health	852	2.95	.58	311	3.02	.55	537	2.91	.60
Extrinsic Life Goals	850	3.25	.36	310	3.28	.33	536	3.23	.37
Intrinsic Life Goals	852	2.83	.45	311	2.89	.43	537	2.79	.45

Table 4 shows the results of the MANOVA, which was used to compare the life goals and aspirations of participants in single and two-parent families. Only significant effects are discussed. The results of the multivariate analysis in Table 4 indicate that there was a significant difference based on the goals and aspirations of participants raised in single- and two-parent families (Hotelling's  $T^2 = 2.89$  (7.84),  $p < 0.01$ ). The results of the ANOVA indicate that participants raised in single-parent families scored higher on wealth, image, personal growth, relationships, and health. Overall, the participants scored higher for intrinsic goals and aspirations in single-parent families than those in two-parent families. There were no other significant findings.

**Table 4** The main effects of family structure on goals and aspirations

Variable	Single-parent families		Two-parent families		<i>F</i>
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	
Wealth	3.39	.35	3.33	.39	5.84**
Image	3.29	.50	3.21	.55	4.52**
Personal Growth	2.70	.58	2.57	.60	9.85**
Relationships	2.51	.64	2.39	.63	7.37**
Health	3.02	.54	2.91	.60	6.64**
Intrinsic Goals	2.89	.43	2.79	.45	9.83**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

## Discussion

This study compared the life goals and aspirations of learners in secondary schools reared in single- and two-parent families. In SDT, the life goal content of an individual is categorised as being either intrinsic or extrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The results in the current study suggest that learners in secondary schools, in general, may aspire to extrinsic life goals which would include wealth, image, and fame. Specifically, the highest score was indicated for wealth. These findings are consistent with previous literature, which suggests that individuals in less affluent contexts and/or countries, such as South Africa, would aspire to extrinsic life goals more than intrinsic life goals (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Grouzet et al., 2005; Ingrid et al., 2009). This could be due to the socio-economic status in families. Furthermore, learners in secondary schools are in the phase of adolescence. In this phase, there is a greater emphasis on 'conformity' which is linked to fame and image, dealing with the approval of others, and how individuals are perceived (Grouzet et al., 2005). According to SDT, the focus on extrinsic life goals ultimately results in diminished subjective well-being (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, Matos & Lacante, 2004). Often extrinsic life goals are associated with negative associations of self-actualisation, vitality and positive affect (Williams et al., 2000). However, Ingrid et al. (2009) state that as much as research has indicated that aspiring to extrinsic life goals is associated with a diminished sense of well-being, this is not always the case, as the pursuit of extrinsic life goals and aspirations is not always unfavourable to an individual's well-being, and can often assist in the promotion and advancement of well-being. What seems to be important, however, is why the individual aspires to certain life goals (Ingrid et al., 2009; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). Vansteenkiste, Lens and Deci (2006) suggest that the relationship between the content of the life goal and well-being can be associated with the goal content that the environment deems important and encourages. Thus, it is important to consider the contextual environments in the identification of these life goals and aspirations (Ingrid et al., 2009).

Context is often considered to provide structure and guidance, and during this

period of being in secondary school, it further allows for learners to aspire to certain goals, aspirations, values and beliefs (Malmberg et al., 2005), which could have implications for the future of people (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). When comparing the life goals and aspirations of learners in single- and two-parent families in the current study, the results suggest that there are significant differences between the groups. Learners in single-parent families aspired more to the life goals and aspirations of wealth, image, personal growth, relationships, and health. Surprisingly, the overall content scores were significantly higher on intrinsic rather than extrinsic life goals and aspirations for learners in single-parent families. The results of the current study differ from previous research as there were no differences between single- and two-parent family comparisons in terms of goals (Carroll et al., 2001). Single parents are often more challenged than their married counterparts because they have less access to resources (Jackson et al., 2000; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983) so the expectation would be that the learners in single-parent families would focus more on extrinsic life goals and aspirations. However, this was not the case in the current study. The pursuit of intrinsic life goals is believed to be related to behaviour and actions that are considered 'self-determined' in nature (McHoskey, 1999). In single-parent families, children may be covertly encouraged to take responsibility, be independent, and have some decision-making roles to play in the family owing to the 'double role' of the parent. This would then encourage children towards personal growth and enhancing relationships with others. By implication, and based on international studies, individuals who focus on intrinsic life goals and aspirations have a greater chance of happiness and well-being than individuals who focus on extrinsic life goals and aspirations. In addition, the focus of these individuals may be on relationship building and pro-social behaviour, which would ultimately have implications of nation building. This is the first time a study in this area of research has been done in South Africa; previous research studies have compared certain issues in families, but have not found significant differences between groups (Myburgh, Poggenpoel & Du Plessis, 2011; Roman, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

A happy and purposeful life, which has meaning, is very often directed by goals and aspirations for the future, which offers structure and meaning to individuals for their future. This will eventually direct the activities that people are involved in and become involved in throughout their lifespan. The results of the current study are important because they could provide significant content for the life-orientation curriculum in schools, which alludes to goal-setting and decision-making. Teachers will also be able to understand why learners aspire to certain factors and goals. If learners continue into adulthood being more focused on fame and wealth, they will probably not engage in community initiatives and activities, and therefore would not engage in pro-social behaviour. This may have implications for building communities and encouraging a sense of participatory citizenship. Perhaps this study can provide insight to relevant



stakeholders as to what and why learners set these goals, and how they can be encouraged to be more pro-social in their interactions with others. This could be done prior to subject choice in Grade 9.

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