

Psychologists analyze language to categorize human goals

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Categorizing the goals of people has long been a challenge for psychologists, with wide disagreement regarding any set of terms intended to cover all of the factors that motivate human behavior.

In an attempt to resolve the issue, a team of researchers led by members of the University of Wyoming Department of Psychology conducted an

exhaustive study of goal-related words used by English speakers. Based upon that analysis, they say human goals can be broadly categorized in terms of four goals: "prominence," "inclusiveness," "negativity prevention" and "tradition."

The research appears in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, one of the most prestigious journals in the field. The project was led by UW Associate Professor Ben Wilkowski and members of his Emotion and Cognition Laboratory, including graduate students Shaun Lappi, Zach Williamson, Elizabeth Ferguson Leki and Emilio Rivera. Other contributors are from the University of Texas-El Paso and Gettysburg College.

"Few questions are more important in the field of psychology than 'What do people want?,' but no set of terms to define those goals has gained widespread acceptance," Wilkowski says. "We decided the best way to address the issue was to examine the words that people use to describe their goals, and we hope our conclusions will help bring about an ultimate consensus."

The researchers started with a list of more than 140,000 English nouns. Through an intensive rating process, those were whittled down to 1,060 deemed relevant to human goals. A series of seven studies then was undertaken, involving surveys of hundreds of people regarding their commitment to pursue the goals, and the researchers arrived at the four components under which all human motives can be categorized:

- Prominence, which covers goals ranging from power and moneymaking to perfection and glory, but most strongly reflects the pursuit of social status—the desire to earn the respect, admiration and deference of others through one's achievements.
- Inclusiveness, which covers a [goal](#) to open-mindedly accept people of all types.

- Negativity prevention, which covers goals to avoid a wide variety of negative outcomes, including conflict, disagreement, isolation and social discord.
- Tradition, which includes a desire to uphold the long-standing institutions of one's [culture](#)—including religion, family, nation and other group values.

"Our findings suggest that the broadest aspects of human motivation are overwhelmingly social in nature," Wilkowski says. "The 'need to belong' and our ultra-social nature are reflected in all four categories."

While they believe the four categories likely apply to many other industrialized cultures, the researchers acknowledge that further research is needed, as their studies addressed only the English language as used within American culture.

"For example, 'church' would not serve as a good marker of tradition in non-Christian cultures; and 'fatness' would not serve as a good marker of negativity prevention in cultures where starvation is a larger concern than obesity," they wrote. "Nonetheless, we suggest that the deeper concepts underlying these four constructs are relevant to the human condition more generally—at least as experienced in large, industrialized cultures."

More information: Benjamin M. Wilkowski et al. Lexical derivation of the PINT taxonomy of goals: Prominence, inclusiveness, negativity prevention, and tradition., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000268](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000268)

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