

## MIT Open Access Articles

### *The Purpose-Driven Life: Commentary on Kenrick Et Al.*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Ackerman, J. M., and J. A. Bargh. "The Purpose-Driven Life: Commentary on Kenrick et al. (2010)." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5 (2010): 323-326. Web. 16 Dec. 2011.

**As Published:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1745691610369472>

**Publisher:** Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/67707>

**Version:** Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

**Terms of use:** Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0



The Purpose-Driven Life  
(Commentary on Kenrick et al., 2010)

Joshua M. Ackerman  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

John A. Bargh  
Yale University

Corresponding Author:  
Joshua Ackerman  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
MIT Sloan School of Management  
1 Amherst Street  
Cambridge, MA 02142  
Fax: (617) 258-7597  
E-mail: [joshack@mit.edu](mailto:joshack@mit.edu)

## Abstract

The resurgence of motivation in social psychology has been a welcome addition to the cognitive revolution, though a theory-based approach to motivational content has remained conspicuously absent. Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg and Schaller (2010) dust off Maslow's hierarchy of needs and find this content in the form of evolutionarily-inspired, fundamental motives. Their new framework unites functional, developmental and proximal levels of analysis by showing how these levels complement rather than compete with each other. We highlight what we see as the especially valuable features of this framework, and discuss its relevance for research on goal conflict, multi-goal priming and recent studies of goal scaffolding. We also suggest one main tweak to the theoretical foundation presented here that may bear greater empirical fruit. In sum, Kenrick and colleagues have reinvigorated a classic theory by integrating it with a modern understanding of human behavior's evolutionary roots.

“The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.” Fanny Fern

The cognitive revolution in psychology was not kind to motivational concepts and models. Soon after Maslow's hierarchy of needs was published, empirical research on motivation was neglected for many years as non-motivational approaches were pushed as hard and as far as possible. Eventually, however, the field of social psychology came to appreciate that motivational concepts needed to be reintroduced for further progress to be made (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Kunda, 1990; Sorrentino & Higgins, 1986; Wyer & Srull, 1986). This new focus emphasized the structural properties of goals and their action at varying levels of consciousness (e.g., Bargh, 1990; Kruglanski, 1996). However, a theory-based analysis of the content of these goals, à la Maslow, remained conspicuously absent. Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg and Schaller's (in press, this issue) reanimation of Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation neatly provides this content in the form of evolutionarily-inspired, fundamental motives. These motives act at multiple levels of analysis and fit a hierarchical framework that, as Fanny might affirm, starts with the stomach and ends with love and parenting.

In this commentary, we highlight what we see as the most critical features of this revised framework, and comment on a few open questions and implications raised by the paper.

#### *Why this framework matters*

In the interest of full disclosure, we're well-fed, rested and writing from the relative safety of our offices, and so our current motivational state might predispose our comments in this section toward feel-good, affiliation-motivated observations. Maslow's original theory included a number of valuable insights, but perhaps the most important

was the attempt to delineate a set of universal human motivations in hierarchical form. This approach predated the rise of evolutionary psychology, but its basic tenets would be familiar to many evolutionary researchers. [Interestingly, Maslow studied primate dominance and sexual behavior in graduate school, though he later explicitly disavowed the need to connect human and animal motives]. Kenrick and colleagues have preserved and expanded this approach, drawing on more modern ideas about function and adaptation.

One of the most relevant of these ideas concerns domain-specificity. Current perspectives on the distinct but flexible forms of information processing and behavior common to different domains of human life do suggest that “Maslow sometimes lumped together functionally (and psychologically) distinct needs into single, overly-broad categories” (p. 12). The current article nicely summarizes research on domain-specific mechanisms and presents a more functionally-tuned set of domains. It also, perhaps, puts self-actualization in its proper place, as a consequence of goal-pursuit in other domains, and not itself a fundamental motive. The self-actualizing quest for expertise is a worthy one, but as a basic drive, it is rather untenable from an evolutionary perspective [“just good enough” and “just soon enough” will typically be the selected strategies, what Clark (1996) referred to as the principles of *least effort* and *opportunistic closure*]. Thus, this quest probably rests in the realm of prescriptive and not descriptive motives.

A second significant contribution involves the coherent focus on multiple levels of analysis in Kenrick and colleagues’ framework. It would certainly make for an easier write-up if the influence of proximate cues could be shrugged aside as Maslow seemed to do (Kenrick et al., p. 32-33), and if fundamental motives emerged through ontogenetic

development in order of their evolutionary importance. Unfortunately, this isn't the case (e.g., infants do not seem to care much about the functionally supreme goal of baby-making). A real problem that researchers must tackle is that different hierarchies can be generated depending on the perspective with which one approaches the issue. We therefore greatly value the authors' integration of developmental- and proximal-level perspectives (which describe pressures on the activation of motives) with a functional perspective (which describes the fundamental motives themselves). In the broader literature, often too little attention is paid to influences at multiple levels of analysis, which as the authors point out, has led to misunderstandings such as the notion that developmental and proximate models represent meaningful alternatives to evolutionary accounts. If nothing else (and we think there is a lot else), the current article elaborates a coherent way to combine both the contents and processes of key motivations across multiple explanatory levels.

Kenrick and colleagues' overall approach is also valuable in that it emphasizes the potential trade-offs that people might make between motives. Oddly, there have been few direct tests of this implication of Maslow's original hierarchy (for examples, see Graham & Balloun, 1973; Strong & Fiebert, 1987). Modern theorizing has promoted the notion that more "primary" motives trump less primary ones, as demonstrated in the actions of early-stage cognitive processing as well as in later behaviors (e.g., Neuberg, Kenrick, Maner, & Schaller, 2004). According to Kenrick and colleagues, "if you are having lunch with your boss, and you discover a scorpion crawling up your leg, self-protection goals are likely to trump whatever food- or status-related goals were salient a moment earlier" (p. 32). These trade-offs should follow derivable rules based on the strength of the

relevant domain, people's current state of goal satisfaction, etc. (Ackerman & Kenrick, 2008). For instance, all people typically retreat from imminent physical harm, but romantically-committed people (who have "completed" their mate acquisition goals) are more likely than uncommitted people to spurn the flirtatious advances of attractive strangers. Of course, counter-examples can also be generated: Soldiers may throw themselves on grenades to save their comrades; people in bars may fight to the death over mates. However, instead of refuting the broader model, these examples appear to represent unique instances in which people (nonconsciously) perceive little opportunity to fulfill active motives outside the proximate environment. Soldiers may have few other ways to powerfully demonstrate fidelity to their coalition. Barflies may have few future mating opportunities available. Thus the cost-benefit ratios of their actions are profitable at a functional level.

Despite the intriguing hypotheses that can be generated about such trade-offs, the research contrasting domain-specific motives is sparse at best. This remains one of the frontiers for work on goal conflict and multi-goal priming. The functional, developmental and proximate weights given to each motive should in theory predict the speed, intensity and order to which they are responded. The question now is whether they do in practice.

*Did the authors succeed?*

Given the variety of domain-style models of human motivation and social life (e.g., Bugental, 2000; Fiske, 1992; Kenrick et al., current issue), we suspect that the debate on which framework is more well-supported will continue for some time. For instance, one might ask whether Kenrick and colleagues have identified the full suite of motives at the proper level of resolution? Maslow himself thought that "Such a theory

should stress and center itself upon ultimate or basic goals rather than partial or superficial ones, upon ends rather than means to these ends” (1943, p. 1). In fact, there are a number of regularities between existing domain-style models, providing strong support for the current motive selections. Further, we agree with Maslow (and Kenrick et al.) that a stress on fundamental motives “would imply a more central place for unconscious than for conscious motivations” (1943, p. 1). This accords with research demonstrating a continuum of such motives across human and other social primate species. In these respects, we feel that the authors have succeeded admirably in detailing a comprehensive and contemporary framework of motivation. However, we were also left wondering whether a slightly different focus on the motivational hierarchy would bear greater theoretical and empirical fruit.

The hierarchy presented in the target article mixes motives described at a functional level of analysis and motives described at a developmental level (see Figure 2). This makes sense in the context of the paper’s focus on integration, but it might also leave the reader wondering as to what elevation in the hierarchy represents. Is it functional weight, developmental order, or some other metric? Likely, the pyramid symbolizes a combination of weight and order at a broad enough level of generalization to represent the prototypical human (Maslow’s original hierarchy similarly merged proximate and developmental levels). Kenrick and colleagues do state that it is “worthwhile to explicitly separate” issues of proximate, developmental and functional analysis (p. 7), making the case for a single hierarchy that much more complicated.

We suggest that in order for a single hierarchy to maximize both predictive power and generalizability, it should be skewed towards a functional weighting scheme. Though



motives do typically emerge in a fixed developmental sequence (e.g., mating motives tend to proceed from acquisition to retention to parenting), this does not tell us much about the relative action of older and younger motives. Again consider the hierarchy presented in Figure 2. Self-protection concerns likely *are* weighted more heavily than affiliation concerns under most circumstances. However, we suspect that some of the upper, developmentally-placed motives would exhibit functional and proximate priority over lower motives. For example, mate retention goals often conflict with affiliation goals (e.g., does one choose to spend the night out with a significant other or with friends?), and we would assert (perhaps based on personal experience) that the former option frequently trumps the latter. Indeed, from an evolutionary perspective, differential reproduction is *the* most important goal that organisms pursue, and thus mating motives are liable to attain functional primacy once they emerge over the course of development. Of course, this weighting scheme is relatively sensitive to the individual-level fluctuations described by Kenrick and colleagues, including variations in the local environment, individual differences and past experiences. A functionally-based scheme would also generate clear empirical predictions. At some level, the ordering of motivational domains is a matter of personal preference, as many different but compelling arguments can be made (e.g., a worthwhile system might entail several functionally-based hierarchies, each corresponding to a separate developmental period). We suspect, though, that the most traction will be gained by focusing primarily on function.

### *Implications of this framework*

For our part, one of the most interesting components of Kenrick and colleagues' framework involves the explicit overlap between motivational domains. The notion that "later developed motivations *build upon rather than replace* earlier ones" (p. 31, emphasis in original) is consistent with the general thinking in evolutionary biology that adaptations often do not arise *ex nihilo*, but co-opt and extend pre-existing structures. Many stage models of human development also support this notion (e.g., Krebs & Van Hesteren, 1994; Levine, 1979). Evolutionary psychologists have traditionally considered mental modules as relatively discrete entities that use unique sorts of cognitive processing to respond to unique sorts of problems. Certainly, selection pressures make this true in some respects. However, if later arising modules co-opt a foundation built by earlier modules, then some degree of commonality, or flexibility, will likely emerge (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2007; Barrett & Kurzban, 2006).

Applying this notion to the realm of goal pursuit, we can say that "younger" goals are *scaffolded* onto "older" goals (Williams, Huang, & Bargh, in press) [scaffolding here refers to an implicit process, and not the effortful teaching-learning that is sometimes named scaffolding]. This process produces a mental association between the older and younger goals (or motives). Thus, various aspects of one goal (e.g., relevant means, affective reactions, completion criteria) are shared with those of a second goal upon which the first is scaffolded. Two empirical examples help to make this point. First, consider the mental association between physical cleanliness and moral cleanliness. Physical disease avoidance goals represent a subset of Kenrick et al.'s self-protection motive, and involve a clearly evolved set of avoidance behaviors and emotions (e.g.,

Ackerman et al., 2009; Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Schaller & Duncan, 2007). Moral cleanliness goals should instead fit within the levels of affiliation or status/esteem motives, as these goals act to preserve one's standing in a group. If moral purity is in fact scaffolded on physical purity goal structures, then we should observe actual overlap of goal pursuit elements when people attempt to "wash away their sins." A number of researchers have found just this (see Williams et al., in press). For example, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) have shown that people primed with moral impurity were more likely to think of physical cleaning words and to favor cleaning products than people not primed with this experience. Further, those morally impure individuals who washed their hands in a study were actually less likely to reaffirm their moral standing by helping another person, suggesting that behavior at one level of motivation satisfied an active motivation at another, younger level. Evidence also exists for a similar overlap between the processing of physical and social pain (e.g., DeWall & Baumeister, 2006).

An intriguing possibility is that younger motives can be satisfied through actions relevant to older levels of motivation, whereas actions that fulfill younger motives may not as effectively complete the operation of older motives. That is, scaffolding may produce relatively uni-directional effects. For instance, a mental association between sensations of physical warmth and social warmth (Williams & Bargh, 2008) may allow an active affiliation goal to be completed through experiences with heat (e.g., drinking hot coffee or tea), whereas making a new friend would not necessarily eliminate an active need for physical warmth. Likewise, protecting the physical self might stop a drive to affirm the psychological self (e.g., by emphasizing one's status or group membership), but self-affirmation is unlikely to equally preclude the desire to pursue a goal of physical

protection. The Fanny Fern quote at the beginning of this commentary might support a similar claim for hunger and love motives. In fact, in his novel *Don Quixote*, Cervantes presaged the concept of uni-directional scaffolding, cleverly stating, “The stomach carries the heart, and not the heart the stomach.” Whether goal scaffolding proves to be uni- or bi-directional, Kenrick et al. have provided a strong theoretical means of predicting specific motivational overlap, and we believe their framework could stimulate a wealth of future investigations in this arena.

### *Conclusions*

The multi-level framework developed by Kenrick and colleagues presents a solid foundation for empirical work on the topics of fundamental motives and interacting motivational states. This framework has significant implications for many of the important “second-generation” questions in the goal pursuit and priming literatures (Bargh, 2006). Namely, what happens when cues to multiple motives are present? And, which one ‘wins,’ if conflicting responses are activated? We might quibble with certain features of the framework, but we recognize its utility as a theory that has elegantly merged findings from evolutionary biology, cognitive development, and basic social and personality psychology to reinvigorate one of the really “good ideas” in behavioral science. We hope that, in the spirit of Cervantes and Fanny Fern, this paper has provided the theoretical sustenance that will motivate a great deal of exciting future work.

## References

- Ackerman, J. M., Becker, D. V., Mortensen, C. R., Sasaki, T., Neuberg, S. L., & Kenrick, D. T. (2009). A pox on the mind: Disjunction of attention and memory in processing physical disfigurement. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45*, 478-485.
- Ackerman, J. M., & Kenrick, D. T. (2008). The costs of benefits: Help-refusals highlight key trade-offs of social life. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *12*, 118-140.
- Ackerman, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Schaller, M. (2007). Is friendship akin to kinship? *Evolution & Human Behavior*, *28*, 365-374.
- Bargh, J. A. (1990). Auto-motives: Preconscious determinants of social interaction. In E. T. Higgins & R. M. Sorrentino (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition* (Vol. 2, pp. 93-130). New York: Guilford.
- Bargh, J. A. (2006). What have we been priming all these years? On the development, mechanisms, and ecology of nonconscious social behavior. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *36*, 147-168.
- Barrett, H. C., & Kurzban, R. (2006). Modularity in cognition: Framing the debate. *Psychological Review*, *113*, 628-647.
- Bugental, D. B. (2000). Acquisition of the algorithms of social life: A domain-based approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*, 187-219.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- DeWall, C. N., & Baumeister, R. F. (2006). Alone but feeling no pain: Effects of social exclusion on physical pain tolerance and pain threshold, affective forecasting, and interpersonal empathy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*, 1-15.
- Fiske, A. P. (1992). The four elementary forms of sociality: Framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychological Review, 99*, 689-723.
- Gollwitzer P.M., & Bargh J.A. (Eds.). (1996). *The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior*. New York: Guilford.
- Graham, W. K., & Balloun, J. (1973). An empirical test of Maslow's need hierarchy theory. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 13*, 97-108.
- Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Neuberg, S. L., & Schaller, M. (in press). Renovating the Pyramid of Needs: Contemporary Extensions Built Upon Ancient Foundations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.
- Krebs, D. L. & Van Hesteren. (1994). The development of altruism: Toward an integrative model. *Developmental Review, 14*, 1-56.
- Kruglanski, A. W. (1996). Motivated social cognition: Principles of the interface. In E. T. Higgins and A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social Psychology: A Handbook of Basic Principles* (pp. 493- 522). New York: Guilford.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 480-498.
- Levine, C. (1979). Stage acquisition and stage use: An appraisal of stage displacement explanations of variation in moral reasoning. *Human Development, 22*, 145-164.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*, 370-396.

- Neuberg, S. L., Kenrick, D. T., Maner, J. K., & Schaller, M. (2005). From evolved motives to everyday mentation: Evolution, goals, and cognition. In J.P. Forgas, K.D. Williams, & S.M. Laham (Eds.), *Social motivation: Conscious and unconscious processes* (pp.133-152). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rozin, P., & Fallon, A. E. (1987). A perspective on disgust. *Psychological Review*, *94*, 23-41.
- Schaller, M., & Duncan, L. A. (2007). The behavioral immune system: Its evolution and social psychological implications. In J. P. Forgas, M. G. Haselton, & W. von Hippel (Eds.), *Evolution and the social mind: Evolutionary psychology and social cognition* (pp. 293–307). New York: Psychology Press.
- Sorrentino, R. M., & Higgins, E. T. (Eds.). (1986). *The handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior*. New York: Guilford.
- Strong, L. L., & Fiebert, M. S. (1987). Using paired comparisons to assess Maslow's hierarchy of needs. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *64*, 492-494.
- Williams, L. E., & Bargh, J. A. (2008). Experiencing physical warmth promotes interpersonal warmth. *Science*, *322*, 606-607.
- Williams, L. E., Huang, J. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (in press). The scaffolded mind: Higher mental processes are grounded in early experience of the physical world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Wyer, R. S., & Srull, T. K. (1986). Human Cognition in Its Social Context. *Psychological Review*, *93*, 322-359.
- Zhong, C. B., & Liljenquist, K. (2006). Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing. *Science*, *313*, 1451-1452.