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Published in:

DOI:
10.1002/9781118970843.ch61

Published: 01/01/2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Please cite the original version:
Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract
Self-determination theory is an empirically based, organismic theory of human nature that focuses on motivation, personality development, and wellness. Rooted in the assumption that humans are inherently curious, self-motivated, and growth-oriented, there are six mini-theories within the theory: Cognitive evaluations theory focuses on how social environments facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation. Organismic integration theory describes the process of integration through which extrinsically motivated behaviors becomes autonomous. Causality orientations theory focuses on the individual differences in how people orient to their environment. Basic psychological needs theory has identified three psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – the satisfaction or thwarting of which significantly influences human growth and wellness. Goal content theory looks at how pursuing intrinsic and extrinsic goals influences well-being, and relationship motivation theory focuses on what makes high-quality interpersonal relationships possible. Together, the theories give substantial information about what conditions and contexts most consistently lead to human languishing or flourishing.

Keywords
basic needs
goals
intrinsic motivation
motivation
well-being

Self-determination theory (SDT) is an empirically based, organismic theory of human nature and behavior that focuses especially on motivation, growth, personality development and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is rooted in the assumption that humans are inherently curious, self-motivated and growth-oriented beings that are not only reactively responding to environmental stimuli but actively self-regulate their lives toward growth and integrity following their internal motives, goals, and values. At the same time the theory acknowledges that human vitality and self-motivation can be significantly diminished in certain contexts and following certain conditions of upbringing. Accordingly, the theory is especially interested in identifying the environmental and social conditions in families, classrooms, workplaces and other life domains that foster or undermine individual’s self-motivation, vitality, and wellness. In other words, the theory aims to identify what conditions and contexts most consistently lead to human flourishing.

The work toward the theory started in early 1970s when Edward L. Deci demonstrated in a number of experiments that externally rewarding certain behavior could undermine people’s intrinsic motivation to engage in such behavior when rewards were absent (e.g. Deci, 1971). This was in stark contrast to the behaviorist assumptions dominant at that time according to which human behavior is to a large degree determined by external reinforcers. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence for the role of intrinsic motivation in explaining human behavior started to accumulate, and in the 1980s Deci – together with Richard M. Ryan, the second founding father of the theory –
formalized the theory, and extended it beyond intrinsic motivation to a general theory of motivation and wellness (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Since the early work by Deci and Ryan, they have been joined by a growing number of researchers that have expanded the theory and taken it from personality and social psychology to encompass developmental and clinical psychologies and more recently also neuropsychology and behavioral economics. Especially in the last two decades the theory has grown into one of the most cited psychological theories of human motivation and wellness and hundreds of empirical papers have been published on the theory, both on its general nature and as applied to various context such as learning and education, workplace motivation, sports and exercise, games and virtual worlds, health care and psychotherapy as well as cultural and religious socialization.

While the metatheory or basic orientation behind SDT emphasized the inherently active and growth-oriented nature of human beings, six more specific and empirically testable mini-theories have been developed around which the theory is organized (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The oldest mini-theory within SDT is the cognitive evaluations theory (CET) that focuses on how social environments facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, and through that, high-quality performance and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1980). According to CET, when extrinsic rewards, evaluations, surveillance or feedback are perceived as controlling, this leads to a more external perceived locus of causality and thwarts the person’s sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation. This is often harmful as research has shown that when people are intrinsically motivated, they tend to learn more deeply, be more creative, be more persistent and perform better in tasks requiring high-quality engagement. At the same time, research has identified other features of the environment that similarly affect intrinsic motivation such as how much information the person has about one’s performance and how much competence one experiences. CET thus deals with how environments affect experiences of both competence and autonomy, and thus support or undermine intrinsic motivation.

Organismic integration theory (OIT), the second mini-theory of SDT, describes the process of integration through which extrinsically motivated behaviors can become autonomous. According to the theory, humans have inherent tendencies to internalize and integrate social and cultural regulations, but certain factors in the environment can promote or inhibit this process of integration. OIT distinguishes between amotivation, and four types of extrinsic motivational regulations: external regulation is focused on complying with externally controlled rewards and avoiding punishments; introjected regulation is about internally controlling one’s behavior related to contingent self-esteem and avoidance of guilt; identified regulation is motivation driven by personal valuing and finding worth in actions and integrated regulation describes motivation that is fully self-endorsed and well assimilated with one’s other values and identifications. The regulations form a continuum (e.g. Ryan & Connell, 1989) and vary systematically in their relative autonomy, with the latter ones being more autonomous and accordingly typically associated with higher quality behavior and persistence. Although need supportive conditions such as providing meaningful rationale and highlighting choice facilitates more autonomous forms of internalization, conditions that thwart need satisfaction can inhibit such internalization and anchor motivation in more controlled forms.

Causality orientations theory (COT) a third mini-theory, focuses on the personality aspects of SDT and the individual differences in how people orient to their environment. Three general causality orientations are recognized within COT (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1985b): Autonomy orientation means a propensity to organize behavior by orienting toward one’s interests and values, and finding and generating contexts that support them. In contrast, controlled orientation means a propensity to pay attention to social controls and reward contingencies and organize one’s behavior by either complying or aiming to defy them. Impersonal orientation, in turn, refers to a tendency to focus on obstacles, and lack of personal or general control over outcomes. The research has looked
at differences between people as a function of how much they emphasize each of these three orientations, and how these orientations can be triggered by motivational primes. The findings in general point toward autonomy orientation, as compared to the two other orientations, leading to more autonomous engagement, more need satisfaction, and better well-being, among other positive outcomes. For example, people high in autonomy orientation can better maintain their intrinsic motivation even when faced with externally controlled contingent rewards (Hagger & Charzisarantis, 2011).

Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), the fourth mini-theory, aims to identify the innate psychological needs the satisfaction or thwarting of which significantly influences human growth, integration and wellness. Psychological needs are understood as necessary nutriments that humans universally need for ongoing psychological development and wellness. BPNT has thus far recognized three such needs: autonomy as a sense of volition and internal locus of causality, competence as a sense of effectance, mastery and growth, and relatedness as a sense of being connected to and cared for by others. Research has shown that all three of these needs have a direct relation with well-being, explaining together a significant amount of variance in people’s sense of wellness, vitality and meaningfulness. A similar pattern of results – need satisfaction leading to wellness – has been found both when looking at between-person differences and within-person fluctuations of need satisfaction (e.g. Reis et al., 2000), and also cross-culturally, and in various contexts ranging from athletes to students and employees.

The fifth mini-theory, goal content theory (GCT), looks at what aspirations people have in life and how the nature of these goals affects their wellness. GCT shows that people’s life goals can be organized into two empirically distinguishable groups, intrinsic and extrinsic (e.g. Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Intrinsic goals are rewarding in their own right and closely associated with psychological needs while extrinsic goals are more closely connected to contingent satisfactions and approval. Typical intrinsic goals are personal development, community involvement, and meaningful relationships while typical extrinsic goals include wealth, fame, and attractive image. The research consistently shows that both aspiring for and attaining intrinsic goals is positively associated with well-being, while aspiring for and attaining extrinsic goals typically either has no relationship with well-being or is even positively associated with certain forms of ill-being (e.g. Niemiec et al., 2009).

The newest mini-theory within SDT is relationship motivation theory (RMT) that focuses on what makes high-quality interpersonal relationships possible. It especially looks at how respect for autonomy facilitates such high-quality relationships and how autonomy and relatedness are intertwined and synergistic in truly responsive, mutually satisfying relationships. RMT suggests that people have an intrinsic need to seek relationships, but while experiencing autonomous motivation within one’s relationship contributes to high-quality relationships and both participants’ well-being, factors such as conditional regard can hurt both the quality of the relationship and well-being of the partners (e.g. Knee et al., 2005).

Emerging areas for research on SDT include the neurological underpinnings of intrinsic motivation (e.g. Murayama et al., 2015) as well as how autonomy-supportive and need-satisfying developmental environments give rise to “the better angels of our nature” and more orientation to prosociality (e.g. Martela & Ryan, 2016), while chronic need thwarting can conduce to various psychopathologies and the darker elements of human nature such as prejudice, selfishness, and aggression.

While SDT originated in the United States, it has been increasingly studied cross-culturally, with research demonstrating that the basic tenets suggested by the theory, such as internalization and autonomy being related to well-being, hold not only in Western countries, but across cultures and societies (e.g. Chirkov et al., 2003). Accordingly, the theory claims to have identified conditions for psychological wellness, growth, and flourishing that are part of the human
nature and not just cultural. This makes SDT not only a descriptive theory of human behavior, but also a normative theory that can be used to evaluate various contexts – such as organizations, societies and cultures – for how autonomy-supportive and need-satisfying these contexts are. In this sense, the theory has been used to make recommendations about how to optimally structure schools, clinics, workplaces, and societies more broadly to support engagement, vitality, wellness, and flourishing.

See Also
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
Needs, McClelland Theory of
Personal and Well-Being

References


Further Reading

Brief Biography
Frank Martela is currently a post-doctoral researcher at Aalto University, Finland. His main research focus is on self-determination theory, meaning in life, compassion, prosocial behavior, and well-being. Having PhDs in both Work Psychology and Leadership as well as Practical Philosophy his interdisciplinary work covers personality and social psychology, organizational research, as well as philosophy, and he has published in journals such as the Journal of Personality, Review of General Psychology, Journal of Positive Psychology, Journal of Happiness Studies, Organization Studies, and Metaphilosophy.