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A cross-cultural analysis of autonomy in education

A self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this article I highlight recent (published after 2000) cross-cultural studies on the role of autonomous academic motivation and autonomy support in students' cognitive and psychological development. The self-determination theory (SDT) thesis of a universal beneficial role of autonomous motivation is supported by numerous empirical results from educational researchers from diverse educational settings around the world. These results are discussed in terms of the importance of recognizing students' basic needs for autonomy in learning environments, and the cultural deterministic models of socio-cultural differences that have obscured that need. Studies within the SDT provide strong psychological evidence to support a more interactive, multidimensional picture of human nature in various socio-cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS   *autonomous motivation, cross-cultural study, education, self-determination theory*

AUTONOMY AND CULTURE DEBATES

SELF–DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT) EMPHASIS ON THE CENTRAL ROLE of self–determined motivation and autonomy in students' education and learning has made it a focal point in the recent debates about the universal beneficial impact that autonomy and autonomy support provide to the positive academic motivation and healthy development of youths across nations and cultures. Some scholars have questioned this thesis about their universal benefits (Cross and Gore, 2003; Iyengar and Leeper, 1999; Murphy-Berman and Berman, 2003).

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Within SDT (see Niemiec and Ryan, this issue), autonomy is understood as the inherited fundamental propensity of any living organism to be self-organized and self-ruled (Varela, 1979; Varela et al., 1974). On a psychological level, this theory considers autonomy as a basic psychological need to experience self-governance and ownership of one's actions. Therefore, autonomous motivation is an attribute of fully functioning individuals across different cultures and societies (Ryan et al., 1997). This universalist point of view on human autonomy and agency is not exclusive to SDT researchers (Reeve et al., 2004) as it has been embraced by developmental scientists (Kagitcibasi, 2005, 2007; Keller, 2007), cultural anthropologists (Brown, 1991), neurophysiologists (Murphy and Brown, 2007), and various sociologists and philosophers (Archer, 2000; Juarrero, 1999). SDT recognizes that cultures differentially designate domains in which members of the society may exercise this fundamental need, and shape the appropriate activities through which autonomous motivation can be practiced. Cultures also assign meaning to people's autonomous experience, interpreting it either as positive and desirable, which needs to be supported and cultivated, or as a negative and undesirable, which needs to be prevented and circumscribed. The universality of this need is emphasized by suggesting that, across cultures, when people view their behavior as being non-autonomous, negative consequences for their well-being and efficiency result.

What is the problem with the cross-cultural application of this universal construct and why do some scientists disagree with this position? The main argument of the psychologists who deny the universal beneficial role of autonomy in people's functioning is that the construct of autonomy or self-determination, together with such cultural values as individualism, liberalism, independence, self-reliance and many others, are constructions of Western civilisation that are not (or are only partially) applicable to the rest of the world, which is depicted as less individualistic and more collectivistic or group-oriented (Markus and Kitayama, 2003). According to this cultural deterministic view, autonomy is a socially constructed value, and its meaning is differently negotiated in various socio-cultural contexts. Autonomy and self-determination are seen as culturally relative virtues, and the endorsement of the universalist view has been blamed as ethnocentric, Western-based intellectual colonialism. Arguments are strong on both sides (Helwig, 2006; Iyengar and DeVoe, 2003) but let's see what recent empirical cross-cultural research in the SDT and other areas of psychology have to offer to support or undermine this universalist view of autonomy.

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EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF THE UNIVERSAL BENEFICIAL
ROLE OF MOTIVATIONAL AUTONOMY

The SDT not only provides a theoretical account of autonomous motivation, but it has also developed innovative ways of operationalizing self-determined motivation through its conceptual continuum and psychological scales stemming that measure different forms of motivation in different contexts and across different domains (Koestner et al., 1996; Pelletier et al., 1997; Ryan and Connell, 1989; Ryan et al., 1993; Vallerand et al., 1993).

Several studies have directly addressed the statistical invariance of the SDT-based scales of autonomous motivation across time, genders and cultures (Chirkov and Ryan, 2001; Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan, 2003; Grouzet, Otis, and Pelletier, 2006; Roth, Assor, Kanat–Maymon, and Kaplan, 2006). When accompanied by the examination of the linguistic invariance of these scales across different languages, ethnicities, and nations (Hagger et al., 2005; Hayamizu, 1997; Rudy et al., 2007; Tanaka and Yamauchi, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1989; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005; Yamauchi and Tanaka, 1998), these studies have demonstrated that these SDT-based operationalizations of autonomy are linguistically meaningful and applicable to the participants from different nations, societies and ethno-linguistic groups.

A second form of evidence regarding the universal role of motivational autonomy in human functioning and academic learning can be found in studies of the beneficial role of autonomous motivation in students' learning and cognitive, moral and psychological development. For example, studies on Chinese learners by Vansteenkiste et al. (2005) demonstrated that, when performing out of autonomous academic motivation, students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) evidenced more adaptive learning attitudes, academic success, and personal well-being, whereas when they were driven by more controlled motivation, they were prone to maladaptive learning attitudes, higher drop-out rates, and ill-being. Recent research in South Korea (Jang et al., in press) used a different approach to test the role of autonomous motivation in learning. These researchers asked students from Seoul about their most and their least satisfying learning experiences and assessed the role that autonomy and other psychological needs played in explaining these experiences. They discovered that a high level of autonomy (together with high competence and relatedness) was associated with the most satisfying learning experiences whereas experiences of low autonomy and low competence were correlated with the least satisfying experiences. In another study within the same project, Jang and colleagues showed that the feeling of satisfaction of the need for autonomy predicted students' academic achievements, school engagement and lower negative affect. These results

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were replicated and validated by controlling for some moderator variables and by using a prospective design. Sheldon et al. (2004) demonstrated that, regardless of the country from which the participants came (PRC, South Korea, Taiwan, and the USA), students preferred to 'own their goals', meaning that they exhibited a higher autonomous motivation relative to the controlled one for their personal goal striving, and that autonomous motivation behind their personal strivings was always accompanied by better subjective well-being. These cross-cultural studies demonstrated that autonomous motivation, when conceptualized through the SDT framework, works beneficially across different cultures, nations and societies.

The third set of arguments to support the thesis about the universal role that autonomy plays in learning and education are the studies that examine the nature of teacher–students relations – their autonomy-supportive character – and their function in promoting students' beneficial learning motivation and positive psychological outcomes. The main argument of cultural determinists is that many cultures highly value obedience to authority, strict discipline, and a hierarchical, authoritarian style of teacher–student relations. In these societies, these scholars believe, supporting students' autonomy, providing them with choices, and acknowledging their feelings, thoughts, and opinions will not be appreciated and, even more, will work against students efficient learning and optimal development (Miller, 1999). The SDT researchers argue against this position, instead suggesting that autonomy support is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of the need for autonomy and cultivating autonomous motivation, and it is universally beneficial, even within cultures in which parents or teachers do not endorse this mode of social interaction (Ryan and Deci, 2003).

To measure perceived autonomy support, some SDT researchers have used modifications of the Teaching Climate Questionnaire, which has been translated into various languages and tested for cross-cultural validity and invariance (Chirkov and Ryan, 2001; Hagger et al., 2007). Studies of the positive role of autonomy supportive academic and familial environments were conducted in some Western countries: Belgium (Soenens et al., 2007), Britain (Ntoumanis, 2005); Canada (Legault et al., 2005), France (Trouilloud et al., 2006); Germany (Levesque et al., 2004), Italy (Szadejko, 2003), Norway (Ommundsen and Kvalo, 2007), and the United, States (Reeve and Jang, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006). Similar research was also done in many non-Western nations, which strongly vary regarding collectivism, authoritarianism, patriarchy and other cultural dimensions, including: Brazil (Chirkov et al., 2005), Israel (Assor et al., 2005; Roth et al., 2007), South Korea (Jang et al., in press), Greece, Poland, and Singapore (Hagger et al., 2005), China (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), Pakistan (Stewart et al., 2000), Russia (Chirkov et al., 2001);

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with multiethnic students in South Africa (Muller and Louw, 2004), Taiwan (Hardre et al., 2006); and varied samples of immigrants and sojourners in Canada (Downie et al., 2007). In accord with the propositions of the SDT, autonomy support from teachers and parents has been associated with or predicted (in longitudinal studies) more autonomous motivation in students, higher academic outcomes, better psychological well-being, fewer problem behaviors, higher self-esteem, less dropping out, and stronger persistence in educational settings. These positive associations and predictions across a wide range of cultures that value autonomy support very differently provide substantial cross-cultural validation of SDT hypotheses concerning the fundamental importance motivational autonomy and autonomy support play in students' functioning.

CONCLUSION

It is a serious conceptual confusion to accuse the propositions about the cross-cultural universality of human agency and motivational autonomy, and about the support for autonomy being an essential condition for all people to flourish and grow, of being ethno-centric, Western-oriented, and colonialistic. This proposition concerning the universality of autonomy is a fundamental humanistic thesis that has been endorsed by leading humanitarians and social scientists across various nations and times. Empirical research based on SDT strongly supports this proposition. It also suggests that some recent applications of cultural relativism represent a denial of fundamental human capabilities, needs, and basic cognitive and motivational predispositions, and are thus representative of the recent 'flight from reality in the human sciences' (Shapiro, 2005) and a simplistic account of the complex interactions between human basic cognitive and motivational propensities and social context. The denial that autonomy is a basic human need may even provide a justification for stripping representatives of some nations from essential human competences, or casting them as puppets of social expectations and socio-cultural pressures. One can often read that inhabitants of Eastern nations are so strongly collectivistic that it is in their nature to avoid autonomy and personal freedom and, because of this nature, they do not benefit from democracy and egalitarian relations and thus prefer authoritarian ruling and control. Currently, many social and developmental researchers argue against this one-dimensional account of cultural dynamics of psychological functioning with strong empirical evidence at hand (Helwig et al., 2007; Lahat et al., in press; Li, 2002, 2004; Neff and Helwig, 2002; Wang and Li, 2003). Thus, the topic of human autonomy, agency, and culture remains at the centre of the

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battle for the humanistic, empowering, and liberating cultural psychology of academic motivation. The SDT is a powerful warrior in this battle.

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