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66 The Empirical Study of Human Autonomy Using Self-Determination Theory

Ryan, Richard M.

Among the most important concerns of people across the globe are issues of freedom and control. Indeed, despite some horrific exceptions, the modern world is trending toward greater human rights, tolerance for diversity, and allowance for individual choices in vocations and lifestyles. Everywhere people fight against oppression and dictatorial controls, and groups that have been stigmatized struggle for equal rights and respect. At a more individual level, people move during their development toward greater self-regulation. They suffer under excessively controlling caregivers, teachers, clinicians, coaches, and bosses. In general, people are more likely to thrive and be positively engaged and motivated in settings where they are empowered and feel a sense of autonomy.

Although most laypeople grasp the import of these issues in everyday life, when I was a young clinical psychologist studying motivation, these topics – human freedom, people's capacities and needs for choice, and development toward increased self-direction and autonomy – were mostly treated as pseudo-phenomena, and were at best topics peripheral to mainstream empirical psychology. Some humanistic and psychodynamic psychologists had made such issues their central themes, but they were often not applying strong scientific methods to support their ideas.

Could it be right that people's concern with freedom and choice – and, oppositely, their feelings of alienation and frustration when overly controlled – are merely illusory issues? Could it be, as a famous cover of the *American Psychologist* once claimed, that human behavior is actually "involuntary"?

Despite the strong pull of clinical work, I was decidedly preoccupied with such questions during graduate school and was convinced, in part because of philosophical training, that psychologists had largely misconceptualized the issues in this area. I was also, in my everyday work in hospital and outpatient settings, confronted with the costs of compromised human autonomy, and I felt that understanding how autonomy and volition could be better supported could have implications in every

applied field, from workplaces and schools to sport fields and psychotherapy clinics.

Thus, despite my initial plan to pursue full-time clinical practice, I began to research this topic, in part occasioned by my friendship and collaborations with Edward Deci, who also has a chapter in this volume (see Chapter 61). Deci had been doing experimental work on *intrinsic motivation*: those behaviors that are driven by spontaneous interest and enjoyment of activities. Intrinsic motivation reflects our evolved tendencies to actively engage our environments, exercise capacities, and assimilate novel ideas; it plays a big role in development and learning, representing nature's "push" from the inside. Yet, however natural this propensity, Deci found that under circumstances that were controlling – where others were attempting to compel behaviors through rewards and punishments –people lost their intrinsic motivation. To me this seemed like an inroad to the study of the broader issue of human autonomy, which was my intellectual passion. Thus began our collaborative development of a broader *self-determination theory* (SDT), which has engaged us in research for more than three decades.

In our early joint studies we looked at teachers' approaches to motivating children in the classroom. We found that teachers who employed more controlling strategies (e.g., those who relied on rewards and punishments to motivate) had students who were less motivated and felt less confident and competent than did teachers who supported children's autonomy. Subsequent longitudinal studies verified these as causal effects, with teachers increasing and decreasing children's motivation and well-being as a function of autonomy-supportive or controlling styles. Seeing such robust effects, we knew this was about more than just intrinsic motivation. We were tapping into a much bigger topic.

From Intrinsic Motivation to the Autonomy Continuum

Intrinsic motivation is characterized by *autonomy* – or, in cognitive attribution terms, an *internal perceived locus of causality*. People experience these behaviors as self-initiated and willingly done. When intrinsically motivated, people experience enjoyment and often "fun."

Yet human life is not all fun and games. As group animals, we engage in many behaviors that are not intrinsically motivated, including many chores, work tasks, and social obligations. We often engage in activities because socializing agents expect, promote, and sometimes even compel us to do them. These non-intrinsically motivated behaviors can vary a lot in terms of their perceived locus of causality or *relative autonomy*. In some contexts, people feel pressured to fulfill social obligations; in others, they

quite volitionally and willingly undertake them. Thus, as many philosophers have argued, one can fully endorse an activity that a society advocates or even demands of its members. Yet, just as surely, people often perform such activities with a resigned sense of compulsion or alienation.

Types of Internalization and Regulation

Together with developmental psychologist James Connell, I began working on a new taxonomy of motivation that represented various types of behavioral regulation that could energize behaviors that were not intrinsically motivated and that varied in relative autonomy. In initial studies we identified four distinct regulatory styles. At the low-autonomy end of this continuum is *external regulation*, when people act because others are controlling them with rewards and punishments. Although external regulation can be powerful (as operant-learning theorists have compellingly shown), it can also lead to poor-quality behavior, as people take the shortest route to reach the reward or escape from the punishment. It is also associated with low interest, and often with more negative affect.

Somewhat more autonomous is *introjection*, in which, instead of being externally controlled, people are self-controlling – pushing themselves around with feelings of guilt or contingent self-esteem. In introjection the individual has internalized others' standards, but not really accepted them as his or her own. Again, although introjection can strongly motivate, it is associated with negative experiences and unstable motivation.

Still higher on this continuum of relative autonomy is *identification*, when people engage in a non-intrinsically motivated activity because they personally value it and find it worthwhile. Behaviors motivated by identification are more persistent, and performance is of higher quality, than behavior motivated by external or introjected regulations.

Finally, as previously described, *intrinsic motivation* is a highly autonomous form of motivation, representing behavior propelled by interest and excitement about the activity rather than its instrumental value.

In the 1980s we began developing both experimental and self-report methods to tap each of these types of motives and their functional consequences. Studies confirmed that these varied motivations differ systematically in their perceived locus of causality, with some experienced as autonomous and others as controlled. Research also showed how these motives are causally connected with social contexts, with more controlling contexts engendering external and introjected regulations, and more autonomy-supportive contexts fostering greater internalization and relative autonomy. Publications on these efforts provided others with assessment tools and hypotheses that were then applied across developmental

and behavioral settings, and methods were extended to include self-reports, experimental inductions, implicit measures, and, more recently, neurological assessments.

Today, literally hundreds of studies apply this SDT taxonomy of regulations in both basic and applied research. Findings routinely show not only unique qualities to each of these motives, but also the fact that the more autonomously people are motivated overall, the higher quality their behavior and the more positive their experience. For instance, students' well-being and learning outcomes are strongly enhanced by greater autonomy, a finding well sustained across development and cultures. Interventions with teachers also show that autonomy-support can be enhanced, in turn improving student outcomes. In clinical settings, we have developed interventions to facilitate greater autonomy, and randomized clinical trials show significant improvements in areas such as weight loss, diabetes management, and smoking cessation, among others. In workplaces, relative autonomy predicts lower turnover and higher employee vitality and wellness, and, as in other domains, is strongly affected by controlling versus autonomy-supportive leadership styles. A voluminous research literature has emerged in other areas as well, including parenting and socialization, physical activity and sport, media use, and psychotherapy. The model has utility for almost every behavioral domain in which motivation matters – and that is pretty much all of them.

There is still a lot to be done. On the mechanistic end, understanding better the neuropsychological bases of SDT's varied regulatory states is one agenda, and it represents a very active area of current research. On the macro end of the spectrum, studies of how cultural and political climates impact autonomy and its effects on well-being and motivation are equally important. In between these micro and macro foci, research on how both developmental and situational factors affect autonomy and motivation continues to be refined. Finally, intervention work is important not only for its practical human value, but for the feedback it provides to the basic sciences of SDT.

Of course, intrinsic motivation and the internalization continuum are just some aspects of SDT, which has grown to be a comprehensive macro-theory addressing issues such as people's basic psychological needs, the role of awareness and mindfulness in behavior regulation, the relevance of eudaimonia and intrinsic versus extrinsic life goals to well-being, the dynamics of vitality and depletion, and many other topics. Yet, in the development of our work in SDT, moving from intrinsic motivation to a broader conceptualization and operationalization of human autonomy was an especially pivotal change. It afforded us not only a richer basis for theory and experimentation, but also the capacity to develop more

effective interventions in workplaces, clinics, schools, sport-fields, and families. And of course for me, as a clinician-researcher, this was the point of doing psychology in the first place.

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