

Self-Determination Theory as a Fundamental Theory of Close Relationships

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Though relatively young, the field of relationships science has an impressive body of research devoted to understanding a range of relational processes including attachment, communality, intimacy, and interdependence. However, relatively little research has examined the motivational underpinnings of these processes. Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a broad perspective on the mechanisms through which relational processes are related to personal well-being and relational functioning and the circumstances under which seemingly positive relational processes particularly result in benefits to relationships and the individuals of which they are comprised. The purpose of this review is to summarise the existing research applying SDT to relational processes and to suggest future avenues for research that will extend both relationships science and SDT.

Keywords: self-determination theory, close relationships, motivation, relationship well-being

Although the study of close relationships has been fundamental to the field of psychology since its inception, the development of a formalized relationships science has only emerged over the last 25 years (Fletcher, 2002; Kelley et al., 1983; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Within this literature are diverse theoretical frameworks examining such processes as attachment, intimacy, communality, and interdependence. Each of these literatures has a long and rich research tradition attesting to the importance of these processes for well-being and optimal relational functioning. However, in this macrocosm of relationships research, relatively little space has been dedicated to understanding the motivational underpinnings of these processes.

One such perspective has characterised relationship motivation by independent tendencies toward approach (moving toward a rewarding or desired end-state) and avoidance (moving away from a punishing undesired end-state), as well as the goals toward the formation and maintenance of social ties manifest from these motives (e.g., Gable, 2006). A second growing literature examines motivation within relationships from the self-determination theory (SDT) perspective (La Guardia, 2007a), focusing on how relational partners either support or undermine the fulfilment of basic psychological needs and how motivational orientations derived from such need fulfilment are maintained or transformed as a function of experiences within relationships.

In this paper we outline how the SDT perspective provides a valuable framework for understanding the motivational underpinnings of important relational processes, such as attachment, intimacy, communality, and interdependence, and further how this motivational structure helps to predict personal growth and devel-

opment. Relationships research typically focuses on how individual personality factors (e.g., attachment style) and/or situational factors (e.g., partner responsiveness) affect how important relational processes unfold (e.g., conflict resolution, intimacy) and how these exchanges impact relational functioning (e.g., commitment, satisfaction). Importantly, the incremental value of the SDT perspective is that it provides a framework for understanding *both* personality and context.

Further, the value of this motivational approach is that while many relational behaviours appear to be oriented toward connecting with a partner, they may have more complex motivational structures and these structures may have their own consequences for personal well-being and relational functioning. That is, while it is clear that when people explicitly attempt to have greater distance from or outrightly reject their partners these relationships will not be close, behaviours between partners that appear to be “positive” may not result in a close and connected partnership. We argue that because many of the constructs discussed within relationships research are not differentiated by their motivational underpinnings, surface behaviours and outcomes measured may not comprehensively depict healthy functioning. Thus, by defining the motivational underpinnings of important relational behaviours, we demonstrate that we are able to identify the circumstances under which seemingly positive behaviours are more or less beneficial for the person and for the relationship.

Notably, while “close relationships” can cover a wide variety of personal relationships (e.g., parent–child, siblings, co-workers), relationships between romantic partners and between friends provide unique dynamics of interdependence, as they have the greatest potential for reciprocal, mutual exchange. Interestingly, despite SDT being at its core a theory that relies heavily on the importance of understanding the social context for optimal growth and development, the majority of the SDT literature focuses on relationships between nonreciprocal partnerships (e.g., physician–patient, parent–child, teacher–student, coach–athlete, manager–worker). Indeed, on the whole, very little research has been done on the

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dynamics between partners in romantic relationships and friendships. We review the existing work in these relationship types and pose new directions for future research that bridge the SDT perspective to other traditional relationship theories.

SDT and Close Relationships

From an SDT perspective, research on the role of motivation in relationships follows two main approaches. The first focuses on the concept of basic psychological needs and how relational partners either support or undermine the fulfilment of these needs. The second approach examines how motivational orientations toward relationships or relational activities can be maintained or transformed vis-à-vis experiences within relationships. We review these two basic approaches used by SDT researchers to examine how these motivational components relate to well-being and relational outcomes, particularly in relationships between romantic partners and between friends. Certainly, while relational partners may end up having differences in who is dominant in the relationship, the dynamic of reciprocal, mutual exchange assumes the potential of partners as equals in the relationship. When exchange is modelled based on this assumption we are then able to understand the observable consequences that result from relationships' failures to follow this mutuality assumption. We now describe each of these approaches and the literatures that follow from their application.

The Role of Need Fulfilment

The central organising concept within SDT is that of basic psychological needs. SDT suggests that there are three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that underlie growth and development (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000a,b). *Autonomy* literally means “self-rule” and refers to self-initiation, volition, and willing endorsement of one’s behaviour (deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). The opposite experience of autonomy is heteronomy and concerns feeling compelled or controlled in one’s behaviour. *Competence* refers to the propensity to experience challenge and mastery in one’s activity (White, 1959). Finally, *relatedness*, or the “need to belong,” refers to the tendency to be oriented toward forming strong and stable interpersonal bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Notably, how one achieves relatedness is the key focus of most traditional relational theories.

Needs by definition are universally important across social contexts, and the social environment is thus key to whether needs are enhanced versus thwarted and consequently whether optimal functioning will be impeded (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). When need supportive partners actively attempt to understand the person’s interests, preferences, and perspectives (autonomy), provide clear, consistent, and reasonable expectations and structure (competence), get involved with, show interest in, direct energy toward the person, and convey that the person is significant and cared for noncontingently (relatedness), need support is evident and optimal functioning is promoted. In contrast, when relational partners are excessively controlling, have unreasonable expectations, are overchallenging, or rejecting, optimal functioning will suffer (Ryan & Deci, 2000a,b, 2001).

While it is possible that certain relationships may be more important for meeting certain needs (e.g., competence support by coworkers; relatedness support by romantic partner), the relative presence or absence of support for all three needs is vital in each relational context. That is, when any of the needs are notably unsupported in a given context, optimal personal functioning as well as functioning within the specific social context is expected to suffer. Thus, relationship-specific need support has important implications for personal health as well as the dynamic functioning within partnerships.

In adolescence and adulthood, close friends and romantic partners become central figures and thus need fulfilment within these important relationships becomes vital to well-being and relational functioning. For example, in a meta-analysis of studies examining need satisfaction within romantic relationships, Patrick, Knee, Canavello, & Lonsbary (2007; Study 1) showed that the more that needs are fulfilled in people’s romantic relationships, the higher their self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect, and the less negative affect they experience overall. Further, with regard to relational quality outcomes, the more people experience need fulfillment in their romantic relationships, the higher their relationship satisfaction and commitment.

There are several processes that may be affected by need support within the relational context and also have functional consequences for the person and the relationship. Below, we discuss more specifically how these needs operate within relational processes of attachment and intimacy to illustrate this point.

Attachment

Attachment is described as an innate regulatory system that, when activated under threat from the environment, functions to reduce arousal or anxiety and promote safety and survival (Bowlby, 1969). That is, when threats arise, people utilise others to protect themselves from harm and to down-regulate their emotional distress. When not activated by threat, relational partners also may serve as a base from which to explore and take risks in the social world. The nature of attachment is importantly influenced by the social context. Indeed, the social context is critical to the development of expectations about the responsiveness of relational partners and for determining what personal behaviours are most adaptive to the relational context. Secure attachment is characterised by partners’ attention and responsiveness to one’s needs when turning toward the partner to obtain comfort and care. However, when partners are not consistently available, reject or abandon the person, or are harsh and frightening when the person expresses need, the person adapts by developing alternative, less optimal ways to cope with his or her distress (manifest as insecure attachment). Thus, orientations toward relationships are developed and updated through experiences within relationships and provide the cognitive, affective, and motivational lens by which people’s engagement in relationships may be understood.

The SDT need framework offers insights into what it means for partners to be “responsive” and highlights the importance of the immediate social context (rather than individual differences) in the proximal prediction of relational outcomes. Specifically, classic conceptualizations of responsiveness or sensitivity (e.g., Bretherton, 1987; Sroufe & Waters, 1977) can be differentiated with respect to the three needs (La Guardia et al., 2000), such that

sensitive others respond to person's initiatives and encourage exploration (autonomy), they provide noncontingent positive regard for the person and a warm, loving, and nurturing environment (relatedness). Further, need supportive partners help the person to not be overwhelmed but instead mobilise his or her resources to act, and thereby provide the necessary foundation from which the person may face challenges optimally (competence). Thus, sensitive partners are essentially supporting basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In a study investigating attachment security across varied relationships, including close friendships and romantic relationships, La Guardia et al. (2000) showed that attachment security was greater in relationships that supported basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Further, attachment was specific to the responsiveness of the relational context, such that attaching differently to different relational partners (getting closer to those who meet one's needs and creating more distance from those who do not) is adaptive and may represent *selectivity* of health-promoting partners. Notably, while attachment security, both at mean levels and in specific relationships, was predictive of greater well-being, this association between attachment security and well-being was substantially mediated by need satisfaction. Thus, amongst the principal reasons that attachment security relates to well-being is that secure attachments provide an arena in which persons are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs.

Other work using the SDT framework has lent further support to these findings. For example, Leak and Cooney (2001) showed that secure attachment was related to greater autonomy in relationships, while fearful-avoidant and preoccupied attachment styles (insecure variants) were negatively related to autonomy. Within relationships, secure attachment was positively associated with psychological health and well-being, and this association was explained by the extent to which people felt greater autonomy in their relationships. In addition, in a study of college students' romantic relationships, Wei, Shaffer, Young, and Zakalik (2005) found that need satisfaction partially mediated the relationship of general attachment anxiety to shame, depression, and loneliness, and fully mediated these relationships when considering attachment avoidance. Finally, in a sample of young adults in dating relationships, Ducat and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) found that the associations of the relational self (marked by dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance) to well-being and to partner behaviours (warmth, rejection, structure, inconsistency, coercion) were mediated by need satisfaction. Thus, across several studies, need fulfillment provides a motivational framework to understand the manifest interpersonal behaviours of attachment in relationships.

Intimacy

According to the interpersonal process model of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988), intimacy is formed through transactions of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. In the model, each person communicates personally relevant information (verbally and/or nonverbally), revealing thoughts and feelings to the other, and the partner responds to the disclosures by conveying acceptance, validation, and care for the discloser. This exchange is recursive and is expected to be mutual, with greater intimacy in the relationship evidenced over time. Central to intimacy theory is the extent to which partners disclose *emotionally* relevant information

to each other and the extent to which partners then each respond to these disclosures (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004). Accordingly, in adulthood, intimacy processes are closely related to attachment processes, as both describe emotion regulation through interpersonal exchange (Reis & Patrick, 1996).

From the SDT perspective, researchers have investigated the role of need support in emotional exchanges, demonstrating that need fulfillment impacts people's emotional experience, their willingness to express their emotions and the relative authenticity of these expressions, as well as their subsequent orientations toward emotional exchanges with partners (see La Guardia, 2007a for review). Willingness to express emotions is important to both attachment and intimacy processes. We use the term "emotional reliance" to reflect the degree to which a person is willing to turn to and rely on another for emotional support. Thus, emotional reliance can be viewed as a cognitive filter that represents specific attitudes toward relational engagement around emotions, and serves as the precursor to actual disclosure. Investigating emotional reliance across varied relationships (including close friendships and romantic relationships), Ryan, La Guardia, Butzel, Chirkov, and Kim (2005) showed systematic variation in emotional reliance in concert with need support, such that greater need satisfaction within relationships was associated with greater willingness to rely on relational partners. Moreover, selective emotional reliance on those who meet one's needs was shown to be adaptive for health, for both men and women and across diverse cultural contexts. That is, although mean level differences in emotion reliance were found across culturally distinct groups (United States, Russia, South Korea, Turkey) and gender, emotional reliance still showed significant benefit to well-being. Thus, need fulfillment appears to be universally important, as the benefits for health and well-being remain despite differences in gender and cultural contexts.

Modeling the Dynamics of Need Support

One of the most important demonstrations for the theory is to effectively model the dynamics of need fulfillment between partners, both in the moment and as it unfolds across time. That is, to understand how needs operate in a relationship, we must understand the contribution of each partner to need fulfillment and how need support between partners helps to shape the relationship over time. Much of the work in relationships from the SDT perspective has employed dyadic and/or time-series designs to model such effects.

Dyadic designs are employed to understand how each partner's need support affects the other partner. For example, Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, and Ryan (2006) examined mutuality of autonomy support in close friendships. They found that greater *receipt* of autonomy support within friendships predicted greater emotional reliance, attachment security, dyadic adjustment, closeness, vitality, and satisfaction. Further, *giving* autonomy support to one's friend was associated with more positive relational functioning as well as greater overall well-being, beyond the effect of receiving support. That is, giving support had its own unique effects on the person, above the benefit attained from receiving support for his or her friend.

In a sample of couples, Patrick, Knee, Canevello, and Lonsbary (2007; Study 2) also assessed the extent to which romantic partners

each provided need support for the other, and assessed the extent to which the giving and receiving of support each contributed to relational quality. Results showed that the more need supportive people are of their partners (giving), the less they perceive conflict and are defensive within conflict, as well as the more satisfied and committed they are to their relationship. Further, the more that their partners are need supportive of them (receiving), the less they perceive conflict and are defensive within conflict, as well as the more satisfied they are in their relationship. Interestingly, partners tended to perceive the least amount of conflict and were the least defensive when both partners reported feeling a sense of belonging and strong connection with their partner (relatedness).

Finally, in a sample of dating couples, La Guardia (2007b) showed that greater need fulfillment was associated with greater emotional awareness, openness to internally processing emotions, and emotional disclosure to one's partner. Further, greater emotional awareness, openness, and disclosure on the part of both the person and his or her partner was associated with greater intimacy, attachment security, and relational vitality for the person. Thus, how one's partner regulates his or her emotions has consequences for one's own relational functioning, beyond one's own regulation. Notably, emotional engagement and its consequences were partially a function of need support in the relationship, as need support was shown to significantly mediate the relationships between emotion regulation functions and relational health outcomes.

Research has also focused on understanding how need support unfolds over time. For example, in a 10-day diary study of undergraduates' disagreements with their romantic partners, Patrick et al. (2007; Study 3) showed that the more need satisfaction people felt with their partner, the more satisfied and committed they felt toward their partner after disagreements. In addition, in a 14-day diary study of dating couples, La Guardia (2007c) showed that daily need fulfillment predicted the extent to which they emotionally engaged with their partner at day's end. Results showed that at the end of the day when coping with leftover negative events with one's partner, greater need support by one's partner was associated with less of a tendency to fixate on negative feelings, retaliate, or to close off from one's partner emotionally and an increased likelihood to talk openly, take the perspective of one's partner, and reconnect after a negative interaction with one's partner. Moreover, reconnection was associated with more positive well-being markers, while fixating on negative feelings, retaliating, or closing off was associated with more negative well-being markers at day's end.

Together, the findings from these studies support the importance of considering motivational underpinnings—in this case, need satisfaction—in a broad set of important relational processes including attachment, intimacy, and emotional reliance. Notably, while current conceptualizations of close relationship processes focus almost exclusively on the importance of relatedness needs, the SDT perspective adds to the literature by also considering the needs for autonomy and competence in relational contexts. Given the mediating role that this broader conceptualization of need satisfaction plays in many of these important relational processes, SDT offers at least one mechanism through which relational experiences are likely to benefit relationships and the individuals of which they are comprised. Further, research examining the dyadic processes involved in need satisfaction suggest that both partners' need satisfaction independently contributes to a range of important

personal and relational outcomes, particularly with regard to negotiating and responding to relational conflicts and partner transgressions. Thus, need satisfaction represents an important contribution of the SDT perspective to relationships science.

Motivational Orientations Toward Relationships

Need support provides the foundation for the development of people's orientations toward subsequent engagement in activities. That is, through experiences with others, people develop reasons to engage in and maintain their behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 2000a,b). Broadly speaking, people's motivational orientations toward behaviours are differentiated by the extent to which they are willingly engaged and volitional with respect to their behaviours, the extent to which they feel coerced or pressured to behave, and the extent to which they feel a lack of effectance in their environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Specifically, SDT defines a person's motivational orientation toward behaviours along a continuum of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Connell, 1989). *Intrinsic motivation* is considered to evidence the greatest degree of autonomy as it is activity pursued because of interest or pleasure in the activity itself. Many of the behaviours people engage in everyday life are not in themselves inherently interesting and thus are not intrinsically motivated but instead are extrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motivation underlies behaviour performed to accomplish some outcome separable from the activity per se, and according to SDT may be divided into four different types of regulation—integrated, identified, introjected, and external. *Integrated* regulation refers to when the value served by a particular behaviour fits coherently with other values and goals of the self. *Identified* regulation refers to behaviour that serves a personally endorsed value or goal. *Introjected* regulation refers to behaviour that is internally regulated by intrapsychic pressures to maintain self-worth or to avoid guilt or anxiety. *External regulation* involves behaving to obtain external rewards or to avoid punishments, and are thus elicited by direct external contingencies. Finally, *amotivation* is evidenced when desired outcomes are not perceived to be contingent on one's behaviour or the person lacks ability to produce the behaviour.

Any given behaviour is regulated by a combination of these regulations, with the balance of these regulations reflecting the relative autonomy for engaging in the behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relative autonomy has been measured at varying levels of generality, including assessment as a general personality disposition (General Causality Orientation Scale [GCOS]; Deci & Ryan, 1985), domain specific motivation (e.g., Couples Motivation Questionnaire [CMQ]; Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990), and motivation to engage in specific behaviours within a given domain such as a romantic relationship or friendship (e.g., Motivation for Relational Activities [MRA]; Gaine & La Guardia, 2007). Importantly, across each of these levels, research shows that differentiating the motives underlying behaviour has significant implications for personal well-being and relational functioning.

First, measured as a general disposition, the GCOS is used to measure people's general tendencies toward autonomous, controlled, and impersonal regulation of their behaviours. The autonomous orientation involves the general tendency to regulate behaviour on the basis of interests and self-endorsed values (intrinsic, identified, integrated regulation); the controlled orientation in-

volves the tendency to regulate behaviour on the basis of external pressures and directives to behave (external, introjected regulation); and the impersonal orientation reflects the general tendency to feel inefficacy in one's actions (amotivation).

The GCOS has been used to predict general tendencies toward disclosure in relationships with others, as well as more specific behaviours in the negotiation of conflict within romantic partnerships. For example, in a diary study of daily interactions of university students, Hodgins, Koestner, and Duncan (1996; Study 2) showed that those who were more autonomously oriented overall reported greater self-disclosure and perceived others to disclose more within interactions. Further, those who were more autonomously oriented felt that they and their partners were more honest in their interactions, they experienced their interactions as more pleasant, and they felt higher self-esteem during their interactions with others. In contrast, those who were more controlled overall reported that they were less honest in close relationships, they were uncomfortable with greater disclosure and honesty in interactions, and they felt lower overall self-esteem in the context of their interactions. Within romantic relationships, Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, and Neighbours (2002) investigated whether trait autonomy (GCOS) influenced how couples cope with and respond to conflict within the partnership. From self-report measures, results showed that the more people were autonomous overall, the more open they were to understanding their partner and the more they reported using active coping strategies in disagreements with their partner. In contrast, those who were more controlled overall reported greater "venting" of emotions and greater attempts to deny problems in their relationships. Observations of these couples within the lab, when discussing differences in their perceptions of their relationship, also showed important behavioural differences between those who were more autonomous and those who were more controlled. Those higher in autonomous motivation showed more positive interaction behaviours (e.g., approaching the other, asking for clarification, conveying understanding of the partner), whereas those higher in controlled motivation displayed fewer of these positive interaction behaviours. In summary, it seems that greater autonomy overall is translated into greater openness and flexibility in relationships, whereas feeling more controlled or pressured overall is related to greater distancing and avoidance in relationships as well as more negative consequences for personal functioning.

When motivation is measured specific to a given relationship the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (e.g., SRQ-friendship) or in the case of romantic relationships the CMQ (Blais et al., 1990) is used to assess people's perceived reasons for engaging in or maintaining their relationship and becomes the proximal determinant of relational outcomes. For example, in a sample of married couples, Blais et al. (1990) showed that more autonomous people were in their relationship, the greater agreement and affection there was between partners, as well as the more happiness reported within the couple. Further, Knee, Lonsbary, Canavello, and Patrick (2005) showed that trait autonomy (GCOS autonomous motivation) allows one to have more open and less defensive responses to conflict in part because trait autonomy promotes autonomous reasons for maintaining the relationship (CMQ). In addition, in a 10-day diary study of undergraduates' disagreements with their romantic partners, Patrick et al. (2007; Study 3) showed that the reason why need support impacts daily relationship satisfaction

and commitment is through the internalised autonomous motives toward connecting with and maintaining the relationship. Thus, relational functioning is predicted by understanding motivations within that context.

Importantly, motives can function more proximally at the level of given activities within relationships, and these motives can differentiate how well people function in the relationship. For example, in a sample of undergraduates in romantic relationships, Gaine and La Guardia (2007) examined the extent to which people were autonomous and controlled with regard to sexual intimacy, physical intimacy, social support, instrumental support, niceties, support for their partner's spiritual life, and support for their partner's life aspirations. Results showed that the more autonomously people engage in each of the activities of their relationship, the greater their commitment, satisfaction, intimacy, and vitality within the relationship. Importantly, these effects were demonstrated beyond the effects of overall relationship motivation (CMQ).

Further, in a cross-sectional survey of spouses who serve as caregivers for their partners who have cancer, the association of attachment to caregiver adjustment was best predicted through caregiving motives, suggesting that how well caregivers adjust to the challenges of caring for a spouse with cancer is affected by the extent to which caregiving behaviours are valued versus externally driven (Kim, Carver, Deci, & Kasser, in press). Specifically, for husbands who were the caregivers, the relation of attachment security to depression was mediated by autonomous motives for caregiving, while the relation of attachment anxiety to life satisfaction was mediated by introjected motives for caregiving. Amongst wives who were caregivers, the relation of attachment security to benefit finding (positive consequences of being a caregiver such as greater appreciation for family) was mediated by autonomous motives for caregiving.

In addition, theory on communality and exchange (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993; Mills & Clark, 1994) examines the extent to which the norms of relational exchange involve the person giving benefits in response to the other's needs and demonstrating care and concern for the other without expected debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit (communal) versus relationships in which benefits are given with the expectation of receiving comparable benefit in return (exchange). In a study of dating couples, La Guardia, Sapp, and Ryan (2008) found that autonomous communion predicted better individual and relational functioning while controlled communion predicted deficits in individual and relational functioning. When examining the dyad, the more pressured people felt to attend to and care for their romantic partner, the less vital, intimate, and satisfied they felt in their relationship. Further, the more that their partner felt pressured to provide support and care to them, the less people felt secure and satisfied in their relationship. Thus, these results suggest that while behaviours on the surface are aimed at connecting to and providing support for others, the intrapersonal pressures underlying behaviours potentially undermine the quality of connection between partners, actually creating more distance and dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Finally, in daily diary studies of dating couples, Patrick (2007) examined the occurrence of pro-relationship behaviours, motives for engaging the pro-relationship behaviours, and consequences for personal well-being (self-esteem, positive affect, negative affect,

and vitality) and relational quality (satisfaction, commitment, closeness). Prorelationship behaviours, such as willingness to sacrifice (tendency to forgo desired activities for the good of the relationship; Van Lange et al., 1997) and accommodation (tendency not to retaliate when a partner behaves poorly; Rusbult et al., 1991) are thought to represent benevolent, prorelationship motivation as they bypass immediate self-interests to promote the interests of one's relationship. However, results show that *why* people engage in prorelationship behaviours is particularly important for how these seemingly positive behaviours impact relationships and the individuals of which they are comprised. That is, the more people were autonomous with regard to prorelationship behaviours, the greater their satisfaction, commitment, and closeness in the relationship, as well as the greater their overall self-esteem, positive affect, and vitality and the less negative affect experienced following pro-relationship behaviours. In a follow-up diary study with dating couples measuring the occurrences of the people's own positive relational behaviours as well as those by their partner, when people engaged in positive relational behaviours toward their partner, they felt particularly satisfied and committed, and felt greater self-esteem and vitality to the extent that they engaged in these behaviours for more autonomous reasons.

Importantly, while accommodating or sacrificing for one's partner may not often be inherently enjoyable (as the activity one engages in for the partner may not be interesting and even at times unpleasant), this research highlights that when these accommodations or sacrifices are *volitionally* valued as important for one's partner and one's relationship, a person may be identified around his or her accommodation or sacrifice—a relatively more autonomous form of functioning—and have greater benefit to personal and relational functioning. This is to be distinguished from circumstances under which a person may sacrifice for or accommodate for his or her partner for more introjected reasons (e.g., because that's what "good partners" do) or for more external reasons (e.g., to get something from the partner, either in the form of approval or reciprocal accommodation or sacrifice), which would be associated with less positive personal and relational functioning. Thus, engaging in positive relational behaviours yields the greatest benefits to personal and relational functioning when done autonomously.

In summary, the findings from these studies highlight the importance of motivation for engaging in a variety of relational behaviours including reasons for being in the relationship, caregiving, and self-sacrifice in relationships. Behaviours that seem relatively positive on the surface are only truly experienced as such when those behaviours are engaged for relatively more autonomous reasons. On the whole, relationships science may thus benefit from consideration of partners' motives for engaging in these behaviours, as having more autonomous reasons for engaging in positive relationship behaviours serves to enhance the positive effects of the behaviours themselves.

The Charge for Future Work

Given the relative infancy of SDT-based research on relational processes in *reciprocal* partnerships, there are several potential directions for future research that could serve to strengthen ties between the theory and relationships science. Below, we discuss the areas we believe to be key to these endeavours.

First, while support of autonomy and relatedness seems to be relatively clearly defined in both nonreciprocal and reciprocal relationships, the support of competence deserves some further attention. In nonreciprocal relationships, competence support has been conceptualized in terms of creating structure, in the form of providing clear guidance and expectations as well as setting limits for the partner. This support is "one-way," as one member of the partnership (e.g., parent) is providing the supportive function for the other (e.g., child). In reciprocal relationships, partners presumably should support each other's competence mutually. Competence support may be thought of as partners helping each other to develop interests or achieve goals in areas that are personally important to them (e.g., work, leisure activities) as well as helping each other to carry out instrumental tasks (e.g., care of household) that have more direct relevance to everyday functioning. However, while these are important functions of a supportive partner, we suggest that competence support should also be conceptualized in terms of the fundamental scaffolding provided by each partner to aid in their relational exchanges. There are two ways in which we believe meaningful structure in and expectations for the relationship are formed and maintained. The first is through relational agreements or "contracts," and the second is implicitly found in our understanding of what makes for healthy relational processes (e.g., emotion coregulation).

Using the example of romantic couples, partners create a "relationship contract" about the expectations that each has for themselves and for the other in the relationship. This "contract" creates a structure by which basic (e.g., who pays the bills) as well as elaborate functions (e.g., the role of the husband/wife) of the relationship are based. The challenge for relationships is that these contracts are not always explicit nor agreed upon initially, and they often change without renegotiation by the partners. Thus, by virtue of having initially different terms or changing terms to the contract, competence support will potentially not be fulfilled optimally.

We also implicitly define competence support by our definitions of what makes important relational processes healthy. One example is evidenced in how emotion regulation is supported within the couple (see La Guardia, 2007b, 2007c). In a relationship, for a husband to regulate his emotion's effectively (e.g., be aware, open, and disclose), he needs his wife to listen unconditionally, help him understand what he is feeling and why, and help him figure out what to do with his feelings. His competence would be undermined if his wife were unavailable or did not fully listen and respond to him, or if she were to take over and hijack his attempts to engage his emotions fully (e.g., disallow his self-expressions, problem-solve for him). Thus, healthy emotion regulation within the couple requires that partners provide supportive scaffolding to each other to navigate emotional highs and lows. Indeed, as Coan (2007) and others have suggested, this social affect regulation system is found at a very basic neural level and is governed by the principle of economy of action and load sharing, such that humans utilise others to reduce their level of energy expenditures by relying on others to reduce risk or harm to their own integrity and to share in the load of affective regulation. By relying on others to take up some of these functions, the person is able to conserve or utilise energies in ways that are more beneficial to the self or their close relationships. Thus, mutuality in competence support is likely vital to the effective operation of fundamental relational processes such

as emotion regulation. Future research should further attend to defining how competence is supported both explicitly and implicitly in such relationship processes.

As our second focus for future work, we suggest that theories of relational processes would benefit from continuing to differentiate behaviour by its motivational underpinnings so as to more robustly predict personal and relational outcomes. As we have discussed, some early research has shown the utility of this in studying various relational activities (Gaine & La Guardia, 2007; Kim et al., in press; Patrick, 2007). However, this proposition also applies to the study of diverse situational dynamics within a relational exchange. In 2003, Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult, and Van Lange introduced a taxonomy of interpersonal situations to help define the nature of key social interchanges (e.g., cooperation, competition) and define how each partner may contribute to these given relational exchanges encountered in everyday life. Van Lange (2000) argued that without a taxonomy of social structures SDT fails to provide an understanding of the basic features relevant to need support (or lack thereof) in any given situation. However, we argue that, regardless of situational signature, the dynamics of need support can be readily seen in the interpersonal exchanges described in the Kelley et al. (2003) taxonomy. Indeed, the SDT literature has already shown that the dynamics of need fulfillment are important to a variety of social exchange situations, in diverse settings, and across diverse cultural contexts (see Ryan & Deci 2000a, 2000c for reviews). Again, while most of these demonstrations have been in relationships that differ in authority, important to future research will be to show more thoroughly how the need dynamics operate within each of the specific situations described by the Kelley et al. (2003) taxonomy in relationships assumed to be reciprocal.

Third, relationships science as a field needs to better define relational outcomes to differentiate healthy versus nonhealthy engagement. For example, commitment is largely measured by whether a person feels tied to (identity) and stays in the relationship (longevity). However, people's ties to their relationships may be phenomenologically experienced as pressured versus authentically endorsed, and they may stay in the relationship for reasons that reflect obligation versus value for the relationship. For example, in a study of romantic relationships, Knee, Canevello, Bush, and Cook (2007) showed that one partner's feelings of commitment depended uniquely on both partners' levels of relationship-contingent self-esteem (having one's self-regard hooked on the nature, process, and outcome of one's relationship). When both partners were higher in relationship-contingent self-esteem and reported strong commitment, stronger feelings of satisfaction or closeness within the relationship were not evidenced. In fact, those who felt the least committed had a partner who was high in relationship-contingent self-esteem while they themselves were lower in relationship-contingent self-esteem. Thus, commitment in itself might not tell us much about whether the relationship is healthy.

Further, we need to use more differentiated measures within a given domain of behaviour and map the motivational orientations onto these behaviours within each domain. For example, in the domain of physical intimacy, partners may still engage in physical affection with each other but the manifest quality of their engagement (e.g., obligatory peck on the cheek vs. passionate kiss) may be differentiated by their underlying motivations. This may be best

measured by understanding not only people's perceptions of the reasons for their own behaviour but also their partners' perceptions of the reasons for their behaviour. Notably, this understanding will also likely have significant implications for clinical practise (see article on SDT in psychotherapy in this issue). Given the body of research suggesting the importance of need support for both personal and relational well-being, increasing need support between partners may be an important focus for individual and couples therapy and may instantiate deeper, more sustaining interactions and commitment.

Fourth, a basic assumption in relationships research is that one of the unique characteristics of close personal relationships is partners' capacity to influence each others' thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Kashy, Campbell & Harris, 2006). Thus, to measure relational processes we need to design studies that capture the dynamic between partners—examining the dyad over time. Beyond showing how reciprocal need support impacts personal and relational functioning, as we have discussed in this paper (La Guardia, 2007b; La Guardia et al., 2007; Patrick, 2007; Patrick et al., 2006), one interesting new development in the SDT literature has been to understand how partners affect the expression of needs. For example, Moller, Deci, and Elliot (2007) found that the fulfillment of relatedness (at an individual difference level) follows a sensitisation model, suggesting that when people feel a sense of belongingness in their relationships, they value belongingness more highly in the future (anticipate and experience greater positive affect). In contrast, people who have low levels of belongingness show lower psychological well-being, and also seem to devalue belongingness so as to prevent setting themselves up for disappointment when satisfying relationships are not available. They found no evidence of the satiation model, in which feeling less belongingness should lead to greater valuation of belongingness (both anticipated and experienced value of satisfaction) and greater levels of experienced belongingness should lead to diminished value (additional belongingness loses its reward potential). Future work could build on this model by examining the sensitisation versus satiation hypotheses in exchanges between couples over time as well as integrate it with emerging models in the relationships literature (e.g., risk regulation system; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

Finally, it would be fruitful to understand how motivation in other domains of life impact close relationship processes. For example, Senecal, Vallerand, and Guay (2001) investigated reasons for commitment to work and family roles to help explain why people have work-family conflict. In a sample of working professionals, feeling valued by one's romantic partner (being regarded as a competent parent and household participant) was associated with more autonomous motivation for family activities, and similarly, the more that one's employer was autonomy supportive, the greater autonomous motivation the person had for work. When both supports were present, work-family conflict was lower, and consequently people experienced less emotional exhaustion and less family alienation (negative feelings/resentment when participating in taking care of children, child education related activities, leisure activities). Thus, the potential for exploring reciprocal effects between personal domains becomes central to understanding how the person's interpersonal system impacts their functioning.

In conclusion, SDT offers an important perspective that we believe is critical to the growth of relationships science. The concepts of need satisfaction and motivation for relationships and relationship behaviours provide important explanatory mechanisms for understanding how relationship experiences are associated with relational functioning and personal well-being. These concepts further explain the circumstances under which seemingly positive relationship experiences are particularly likely to be experienced as such. SDT thus offers fertile ground for new explorations in relationship experiences including a focus on the dynamic nature of relationships, a refinement of the qualitative differences amongst relational outcomes as a function of a relationship's motivational underpinnings, and the role of motivational underpinnings in multiple relational domains to healthy functioning. These and other research directions will help us to further elucidate the role of need satisfaction and relationship motivation in a range of relational experiences and further hone our understanding of these varied relational processes.

Résumé

Bien qu'il en soit encore à ses débuts, le domaine de la science des rapports humains a fait l'objet d'un grand nombre de recherches consacrées à la compréhension d'un éventail de processus relationnels, y compris l'attachement, la communauté, l'intimité et l'interdépendance. Toutefois, très peu de recherche a été effectuée sur les éléments motivationnels sous-jacents à ces processus. La théorie de l'autodétermination offre une vue d'ensemble sur les mécanismes par lesquels les processus relationnels sont reliés au bien-être personnel et au fonctionnement des relations, et les circonstances dans lesquelles des processus relationnels apparemment positifs bénéficient surtout les rapports humains et les personnes qui les entretiennent. L'objectif de l'étude vise à résumer la recherche existante appliquant la théorie de l'autodétermination aux processus relationnels et à proposer des sujets de recherche futurs qui enrichiront la science des rapports humains ainsi que la théorie de l'autodétermination.

Mots-clés : théorie de l'autodétermination, relations intimes, motivation, bien-être de la relation

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