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## *Complementary Perspectives on Autonomy in Self-Determination Theory and Language Learner Autonomy*

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For more than two decades, self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) has been an important conceptual framework for understanding motivation across diverse domains, including foreign and second language (L2) learning (e.g., Noels, 2001; Noels, Chaffee, Lou, & Dincer, 2016; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000). SDT posits that learners' sense of autonomy is critical for their motivation and well-being, as do many other L2 theories (for overviews, see Benson, 2013; Littlewood, 1999; Oxford, 2015). Recently, Lee (2017) raised some insightful questions and important concerns

about integrating the concept of autonomy in SDT with that in language learner autonomy (LLA) research. We appreciate Lee's analysis of the nuanced yet impactful differences between these concepts, as critical comparisons of concepts and theories are as important as empirical and interpretive research for developing scholarly understanding of a phenomenon. To summarize his article, Lee argues, from an LLA perspective, that an autonomous learner is one who has developed "the capacity to take charge of" (p. 220) and regulate her/his own learning independently of others. He contrasts this definition with the SDT notion of autonomous learners, who voluntarily engage in an activity that concurs with their sense of self. Lee claims that, given the conceptualizations of autonomy in language learning and in SDT "may not be in tune with each other" (p. 225) because autonomy in SDT is construed as an inherent psychological need that must be satisfied, whereas autonomy in LLA is construed as a learned capacity that must be developed. Referring to three examples, he claims L2 researchers are confused about the differences in conceptualizations, the process of internalization, and the role of choice in SDT, and L2 researchers conflate "autonomy" in SDT with "independence," finally arguing that self-regulation in SDT has different origins than self-regulation in LLA.

Although we welcome discussion of conceptual definitions, and agree that autonomy in SDT research is conceptualized differently from some conceptualizations of autonomy within LLA research, several aspects of Lee's analysis raise concerns that we wish to address as researchers who have long used SDT as one lens for understanding L2 motivation. In our understanding, LLA, as articulated by Lee, is a learning theory focused on how learners develop the capacity to take control of their learning, whereas SDT is a motivational theory focused on why people do what they do and how much energy they invest in what they do.<sup>1</sup> From our point of view, Lee neglected to address motivational aspects of learner autonomy, mixed up the concepts of perceived autonomy with the need for autonomy, misrepresented autonomy in SDT by limiting the scope of the SDT framework, and selected unrepresentative examples of studies to justify his claim that L2 researchers have equated SDT notions of autonomy with independence or exercising control. Moreover, despite raising important issues, Lee offers little direction for how to integrate the two perspectives. Below, we present an alternative, hopefully broader, perspective on autonomy in both LLA and SDT frameworks, and discuss in greater detail how SDT's perspective on autonomy complements conceptualizations of LLA.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this distinction between motivational and learning theories.

## **LANGUAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY: WHY LEE'S LLA PERSPECTIVE IS NOT SUFFICIENT**

The field of LLA originated in response to a perceived need to develop adult learners' responsibility and capacity to be independent and proactive learners (Holec, 1981). As Benson's review (2013) shows, learner autonomy is theorized in multiple ways across LLA research due to its dynamic, multidimensional, complex nature, and its roots in multiple education theories (see also Oxford, 2015). Nevertheless, there are three characteristics of LLA that are commonly agreed upon. First is that LLA centres on learners' "ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Second, autonomous learning processes concern interdependence. As drawn from sociocultural learning theory, learners' autonomous behaviours arise through scaffolding within interdependent settings of interactions between learners and others—particularly teachers (Little, 1995). Third, and consistent with self-regulation theory (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011), learner autonomy focuses on concerns about how to develop students' capacity to learn for themselves, including knowledge and skills related to goal setting, process monitoring, material selection, and outcome evaluation (Benson, 2007).

Although Lee's description of LLA includes the above-mentioned characteristics, it misses the motivational aspect of autonomy discussed by other L2 researchers. Lee articulates how learners regulate their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions, but does not consider the reasons why they are motivated to regulate their learning process. This motivation question is essential in several discussions of the autonomous learning processes (Oxford, 2015; Ushioda, 2011); that is, autonomous learners not only have the ability and freedom, but also the desire to control their learning (Benson, 2013). Indeed, Ushioda (2011) argues that language learners develop autonomous learning only when they have the motive to do so.

## **WHAT IS AUTONOMY? OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SDT PERSPECTIVE**

SDT assumes autonomy is one of three inherent psychological needs. As noted by Lee (2017), autonomy involves volition, perceived choice, and an internal perceived locus of causality (a sense that one's behaviour originates from and is regulated by oneself; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Lee, however, glosses over a fourth key characteristic of SDT's notion of autonomy: perceived relevance (i.e., a sense of

personally meaningful rationale for the activity; Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Noels et al., 2000). It is perhaps because of this that Lee is concerned with Ushioda's suggestion (2011) that the need for autonomy may be fulfilled by having "students make plans and decisions about their learning" (p. 224) and points out that students may feel pressured into these actions rather than feel autonomous. We agree with Lee. However, to provide learners with opportunities that are truly autonomous, those opportunities must be personally relevant. When learners are provided with options that are personally meaningful, even if the options are few, they feel autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In contrast, when learners feel learning activities are not self-relevant, they may have little willingness to engage in self-regulatory practices even if many options are provided (Kim & Drolet, 2003).

In addition to the need for autonomy, SDT posits people have a need for competence and a need for relatedness. Learners need to feel effective in dealing with the environment and connected to people they care about and who care about them (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT maintains that learners act and engage in learning activities in a way that corresponds with how well they feel their three interrelated psychological needs are met (Noels et al., 2000, 2016; Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, Parker, & Ryan, 2017). Importantly, it is experiencing satisfaction of the three needs jointly that promotes optimal functioning (i.e., engaged action and well-being), including the maintenance of intrinsic interest in learning activities and the internalization of new knowledge and practices (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

By discussing perceived autonomy in isolation from the other two needs, Lee's (2017) article misrepresents the scope of SDT and underestimates its usefulness in understanding autonomous learning. For instance, Lee argues that SDT's notion of autonomy does not consider Vygotskian interdependence, which "underpins the problem of incorporating SDT into LLA research" (p. 223). Contrary to Lee's opinion, we believe Vygotskian notions of interdependence are compatible with the SDT notion of relatedness. Good quality relationships with people who influence students' learning experiences are necessary for internalizing the language-learning process into something that is personally relevant, meaningful, and autonomously pursued (Noels et al., 2016). We argue that whereas Vygotskian theory explains, at a sociocognitive level, the process by which learners acquire perspectives and skills from key mentors (e.g., through scaffolding), SDT explains, at a socio-motivational level, the circumstances under which learners will internalize those skills. Specifically, learners model and internalize behaviours and perspectives of mentors with whom they share a sense of relatedness and trust. Of course, the extent of internalization will

depend on whether, in addition to feeling socially connected, the individual also feels competent and autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Not only does SDT speak to the notion of interdependence through relatedness, it also addresses the social nature of autonomy by positing that interactions between the learner and significant others in their social context are essential for the development of autonomy (Littlewood, 1999; Noels et al., 2016; Reeve et al., 2004). Many SDT researchers posit that interactions with significant others (e.g., teachers, classmates, parents, members of the target language community) who support autonomy, offer informational feedback, and provide positive regard, help fulfill learners' psychological needs. In turn, satisfaction of the basic needs fosters learners' self-determined and intrinsic motivation, engagement, and ultimately achievement and success in language learning. Like Lee's characterization of autonomy from the LLA perspective, autonomy from an SDT perspective does not happen in a "decontextualized, individualized setting" (p. 221).

Lee (2017) also claims that SDT and LLA are irreconcilable because autonomy in SDT is "cast as a psychological need, and a sense of autonomy is construed as self-perception of volition support conditioned on socially situated influences" (p. 223), whereas autonomy in LLA is characterized as a "kind of individual capacity and attitude that can be fostered" (p. 223). We agree that in SDT autonomy is theorized as a need and "conditioned" by the social ecology. However, we would disagree with Lee's claim that "perceived volitional support is not a personal attribute" (p. 223); to the contrary, a sense of autonomy (i.e., self-perceptions of autonomy) is indeed a very personal experience. Although the need for autonomy is hypothesized to be innate, our sense of how well that need is satisfied or thwarted is affected by interactions within our social worlds.<sup>2</sup> When our social environment affords us opportunities to act autonomously, we will develop perceived autonomy; when we perceive people, institutions, or other aspects of the sociocultural context as controlling us, our sense of autonomy is diminished. This semantic distinction is highly important. Although the existence of the three psychological needs is a central assumption in SDT, its focus is not on their existence, but on the impact that a sense of fulfillment or thwarting of these needs has on optimal functioning and growth. That is, how to develop learners' perceived autonomy, rather than their need for autonomy, is the focus of SDT. Therefore, both SDT and LLA models suggest that significant others in the learning environment play a role in learners' autonomy. In SDT, others support

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<sup>2</sup> Although much SDT research focuses on the social ecology, it is conceivable that physical, virtual, institutional, or other ecologies, as well as personal histories, could also contribute to support the basic psychological needs (or the lack thereof).

or thwart learners' sense of autonomy (and relatedness and competence); in LLA, others model and scaffold the skills and strategies the learners need to self-regulate the learning process and act in a self-reliant manner.

## **THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF SDT AND LLA PERSPECTIVES ON SELF-REGULATION**

Self-regulation is an important process that is influenced by self-determination (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Lee (2017) argues that self-regulation is defined differently in SDT and LLA research and may come from different sources. In contrast, our reading of the literature suggests that both groups of researchers generally define self-regulation similarly (i.e., learning in which students manage their own learning strategies, thoughts, and feelings in the learning context); where they differ is that LLA researchers tend to study how students can regulate their learning, whereas SDT researchers offer a causal explanation for how self-regulated action comes about (i.e., from the satisfaction of three needs). Experimental and longitudinal research show that learners who endorse a stronger self-determined motivation self-regulate better (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). In other words, SDT addresses how autonomy-supportive environments facilitate learners' development of autonomous self-regulation.

We also understand Lee (2017) to be saying that self-regulated learning must stem from self-determined motivation under SDT, but could stem from controlled motives based on the LLA definition (p. 225). We agree that, from the SDT perspective, a controlled regulation means that learners perceive that they are not the regulators of their behaviours, and therefore the behaviours are other-regulated rather than self-regulated. In other words, autonomous self-regulation according to SDT may stem from either intrinsic or extrinsic motives, but self-regulation will be facilitated only if the degree of internalization of the activity is high (i.e., if the reason is intrinsic or comes from personally important goals). Lee suggests self-regulated learning could occur without personal volition from an LLA perspective. This may be possible, but we believe that it would be an arduous process for the learner, who would be unlikely to persist once the controlling forces are removed, unless care were taken to facilitate the internalization of regulation through support of the learner's autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

## A COMMENT ON SDT LITERATURE IN L2

Many researchers have incorporated SDT into language learning research, with over 200 articles regarding “self-determination theory” and “language learning” listed in *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* (LLBA; search conducted in July 2017). Referring to three, seemingly arbitrarily selected, papers (Kormos & Csizér, 2014; Ushioda, 2011; Vandergrift, 2005), Lee (2017) argues that, when SDT’s conceptualization of autonomy has been incorporated in L2 research, the researchers’ framing and/or operationalization of the construct has been problematic. Our reading of these articles, however, suggests instead that these thoughtful papers are not particularly egregious in their articulation of SDT, but instead suggest some intriguing directions for integrating the LLA and SDT perspectives.

In the case of Vandergrift (2005), Lee takes issue with Vandergrift’s attempt to explain a nonsignificant correlation between self-determined motivation and listening proficiency, in which Vandergrift proposes that learners in some cultures might not prefer autonomy-oriented classrooms but would rather defer to the teacher’s authority, especially early in the learning process. Lee suggests that this proposal demonstrates that Vandergrift equates “autonomy” and “independence,” but we fail to discern how this is so, especially since the word *independence* is used nowhere in Vandergrift’s article. We do agree with Lee that it would be important to ascertain whether the students felt they voluntarily decided to follow the teachers’ lead, which, along with Vandergrift’s reflection, suggests intriguing directions for future research in terms of assessing self-perceptions, and also cultural differences, a topic that had not received very much attention when Vandergrift’s paper was published (see Noels, Chaffee, Michalyk, & McEown, 2014, for a discussion of culture, autonomy, and SDT).

Lee (2017) expresses a related concern with Ushioda’s (2011) suggestion that instructors might structure courses so that students can make plans and decisions about their learning, thereby supporting their sense of personal agency and self-determination. He rightly points out that offering choices does not necessarily result in feeling greater autonomy if the student feels pressured by the instructor. Unlike Lee, however, we feel that Ushioda is well aware of this distinction between making choices and “a feeling of choice,” as demonstrated by her use of the term *sense of* autonomy in the preceding clause of the same sentence (p. 224). It would seem reasonable to hypothesize, as she does, that one reason why students would experience a sense of autonomy is because they are making decisions that



are relevant to their interests (cf. self-perception theory; Bem, 1967). Indeed, it is noteworthy that intervention research has shown that self-perceptions of autonomy can be fostered in the language classroom (e.g., Tanaka & Hiromori, 2007; Wu, 2003). In summary, Lee's use of limited and nonrepresentative SDT literature leads to a misleading conclusion about the compatibility of SDT and LLA.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Conversations about the similarities and differences between key concepts across theoretical frameworks are enlightening, but in order for such discussion to advance scholarly inquiry it is necessary that each position is accurately, fully, and clearly articulated before critique is attempted and conclusions about constructs and theories' relative comprehensiveness, concision, and utility (both for application and as a heuristic for future inquiry) are made. This process involves a close reading of relevant texts to provide unambiguous evidence for claims made. Only then can scholars determine the value of a theory for directing scholarly inquiry and decide whether it must be rejected or modified. Or, as we believe is the case with regard to SDT's notion of autonomy as agentic self-determination and LLA's notion of autonomy as independent self-regulation, one might decide that the two frameworks provide complementary perspectives on a complex phenomenon (MacIntyre, Noels, & Moore, 2010).

In conclusion, to respond Lee's (2017) question whether "to be autonomous or not" we say "yes, be autonomous." We agree with Lee's ultimate conclusion that notions of autonomy in SDT and LLA can be "intertwined" (p. 226). SDT offers a framework for understanding the psychological and social underpinnings of autonomous learning (i.e., the "why" of autonomous learning; Benson, 2013; Oxford, 2015). SDT also provides insight into how autonomous learning can be supported by teachers and classroom environments, as well as elucidating the process through which autonomy, in concert with competence and relatedness, can help students to internalize regulation and develop self-regulated learning (e.g., Noels, 2009; Reeve, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Therefore, in line with other researchers in the emerging, interdisciplinary field of language learning psychology (Mercer, Ryan, & Williams, 2012), we believe that more discussion about the conceptualizations of autonomy in psychology and in language learning can together contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intertwined roles of autonomy, motivation, and self-regulation in language learning.



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