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A generative legacy: SDT's refined understanding of the central role of autonomy in human lives.

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Abstract

The authors of this legacy article (Ryan et al., 2021) were wise to focus attention on the meaning and significance of autonomous functioning in human lives. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) highlights the importance of three basic psychological needs in relation to human motivation, development, and wellness: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (ARC); but what has always been unique about the theory is its emphasis on autonomy (McAdams, 2015). Relatedness has been well explored by attachment theorists (Crittenden, 2017), and competence has been highlighted in the motivational theory of life span development (Heckhausen et al., 2010). A focus on the meaning of autonomy is important because many confuse autonomy with the concepts of independence, self-reliance, and individualism. In SDT, autonomy is defined as feeling volitional about one's actions.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), founded by Ed Deci and Richard Ryan (1980), has a rich past and bright future. Empirical support for SDT has accumulated rapidly over the last decade to the point where over two dozen meta-analyses now confirm central tenets of the theory, such as the undermining effect of rewards on intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999), the benefits of autonomy support on health behavior (Ntoumanis et al., 2020), and the importance of autonomy across cultures (Yu, Levesque-Bristol & Maeda, 2018). Applied studies have shown that autonomy support is useful in improving people's lives in family (Lerner & Grolnick, 2019), school (Cheon et al., 2019), work (Gagné, 2018), and leisure settings (Rocchi & Pelletier, 2018).

The authors of this legacy article were wise to focus attention on the meaning and significance of autonomous functioning in human lives (Ryan, Deci, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, 2020). SDT highlights the importance of three basic psychological needs in relation to human motivation, development and wellness: – autonomy, relatedness, and competence (ARC); but what has always been unique about the theory is its emphasis on autonomy (McAdams, 2015). Relatedness has been well explored by attachment theorists (Crittenden, 2017) and competence has been highlighted in the motivational theory of lifespan development (Heckhausen, et al., 2010).

A focus on the meaning of autonomy is important because many confuse autonomy with the concepts of independence, self-reliance, and individualism. In SDT, autonomy is defined as feeling volitional about one's actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is measured by asking people whether they are doing something because of interest and value or because of internal or external pressures. Informally, autonomous actions are those you “want to do” rather than “have to do,” autonomous activities are those “you *get to do*” instead of those that “you *got to do*,” and autonomous goals are those you pursue *whole-heartedly* rather than *half-heartedly*.

The current debate about public health mandates to reduce the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the nuances of the SDT perspective on autonomy. Many people refuse to wear masks in public places even though the pandemic is resurging. The stated reason for refusal might be confused with autonomy because it argues that requiring citizens to wear a mask is a violation of “personal freedom,” a synonym of autonomy. However, SDT’s understanding of autonomy would suggest that, in most cases, refusers are not acting freely and with volition, but rather, they are behaving in line with controlling group norms or personal introjects. Interestingly, SDT also hypothesizes that not all the people who wear masks are doing so autonomously, some may be blindly following the guidelines of authorities. But SDT asserts that there also many people who whole-heartedly endorse wearing a mask because they feel that such behavior is a personally meaningful adaptation to the danger of the Covid-19 virus, an adaptation that will protect both their own, and others’ health.

A review of the last decade of SDT research suggests that this special issue may represent just the *first* time that *Motivation Science* explores the “*legacy*” of self-determination theory. Given the remarkable expansion of the theory across various subareas of psychology, and its application to important, real-life psychological issues such as inter-group conflict (Kachanoff et al, 2020), the process of coming out about one’s sexuality (Legate, Ryan & Weinstein, 2012), and adherence to health guidelines during the Covid-19 pandemic (Vansteenkiste, 2020), we would predict that a new “*legacy*” article about SDT will be needed in roughly 5 years’ time.

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