

## **Self-Determination Theory: Eminent Legacy with Boundless Possibilities for Advancement**

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Self-determination theory (SDT) is a whale in a sea of countless psychological theories of human motivation. The theory's main tenet (of many) places people's basic needs to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the heart of their functioning. With this main principle, SDT has wide applicability across behaviors, settings, and circumstances with dependable predictiveness that few theories can rival. As Richard Ryan, Edward Deci, Maarten Vansteenkiste, and Bart Soenens (2021) clearly illustrate in their legacy article on SDT for *Motivation Science*, few theories are so consistently useful for explaining phenomena as diverse as students' learning in the classroom, romantic relationships and friendship, mental health treatment efficacy, the role of parenting in child outcomes, effective coaching and athlete's success, the benefits of mindfulness, employee satisfaction at work, antecedents of bullying, and even, how poverty and inequality contribute to people's well-being (to name just a small number of themes).

As I reflected on the significance of SDT's legacy, I was reminded of comments expressed by a panel of impressive mid-career scholars invited to speak in a special session on integrating an understanding of race, culture, and equity into motivation scholarship at the 2019 meeting of the American Educational Research Association. During that session, the discussion moderator, Akane Zusho, posed the question (and I'm paraphrasing), how do you see the current research on motivation as it pertains to the continuum from cultural relativism to cultural universalism? After a weighty pause, Ellen Usher hesitantly offered the following idea, noting it had been suggested to her by another colleague, Paul Schutz, just earlier that day. She said, that among motivation theories, perhaps the psychological needs as posed by SDT are among few

universals for explaining human functioning. The extension of her thought was that our understanding of motivation is likely very different depending on culture and context, though the Euro- and Western-centrism bias in most motivation research has not made that reality fully apparent. However, that those three needs play an important role in our functioning is likely something we all share. Jamaal Sharif Matthews extended this discussion with an analogy to suggest that SDT is like an “off-the-rack suit,” one that fits most (or even all) people and gets us pretty far in understanding human functioning, but perhaps lacks the precise fit of a “well-tailored suit” (or theory) that was made to the specifications of the person (or the culture and context).

Let me stick with this analogy for a moment to suggest that few motivation theories fit so well, that is, are so widely and usefully applicable, “off-the-rack.” (This panel struggled to name others.) But beyond its applicability even without alteration, SDT is a high-quality “off-the-rack” model that is worth the effort and cost of tailoring to precision. SDT accommodates adaptation and encourages it with an emphasis on the functional significance of people’s experiences. Revisions can be integrated without completely unknitting its key tenets. After many years of discussing ideas from SDT with interested parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and of course, my own colleagues, students, friends, and family, I’ve yet to encounter anyone who denies the essential role that those three needs play in our lives (noting that whether stakeholders actually make use of SDT ideas in practice is a separate issue). However, SDT goes beyond having the legitimacy of a “folk psychology” that is aligned with our lived experiences. SDT is a strong theory with very extensive empirical evidence to support it. It can be used to design effective interventions and guidelines for practice that improve people’s lives, as demonstrated by existing education, health, and sport research as convenient examples.

The authors of the legacy article (2021) say, “If there is a primary legacy for SDT it may be that of developing a framework for research and intervention that ultimately serves humanity’s realization of the best within us by focusing on what matters most.” I agree. SDT is a humanistic approach that centers how people experience their worlds and focuses on critical catalysts (and impediments) of the growth that we are all capable. But, even after thousands of studies conducted and articles written, SDT still has much room and need to develop. My hopes for the future of SDT are twofold. First, I hope the future of SDT is filled with more precision tailoring that will allow us to realize its potential for explaining the motivation and well-being of people from varying races and backgrounds existing in diverse cultures and contexts. Second, I hope the future of SDT continues to move from studying to applying, with SDT more extensively informing everyday practice, strategic intervention, and societal policy. Far from death to leave merely a legacy, the future of SDT is filled with the promise of important advancements for the betterment of society.

## References

Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Vansteenkiste, M., & Soenens, B. (2021). Building a science of motivated persons: Self-determination theory's empirical approach to human experience and the regulation of behavior. *Motivation Science*.