

**A legacy unfinished: Further comments on self-determination theory  
and its new frontiers**

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It's an honor to receive comments provided by such an esteemed group of scholars, and their recognition of the progress in motivational sciences catalyzed by a global community of self-determination theory (SDT) researchers. Given limited space, we respond to only a few of their reactions.

In our legacy article we particularly focused on autonomy, in part because, as Koestner and Holding (2021) highlighted, SDT is unique in its emphasis on this concept. Koestner and Holding further suggested that SDT's emphasis on autonomy has a particular salience in this age of COVID-19 in which voluntary compliance matters to public health. We agree, and have seen SDT's ability to differentiate between autonomy and "freedom," and to identify strategies that facilitate maintained behavior change to be highly relevant in this pandemic (e.g., Martela et al., 2021; Morbée et al., 2021).

Concerning this emphasis on autonomy, Sheldon and Goffredi (2021) worried that SDT faces a "major threat" from determinists who object to "free will". Yet, we

suggest that sophisticated determinism is not at all a threat to SDT's organismic approach. SDT conceptualizes autonomy, not as some disembodied "free will," but rather as a form of human functioning, with its own developmental foundations, biological mechanisms, phenomenology, and consequences. Thus, as Ryan et al. (2012) state: "popular attacks on free will and self-regulation from social psychologists should not disturb anyone who is listening carefully, because the concepts they knock down are not consistent with practical living" (p. 218). In contrast, the concept of autonomy described within SDT is philosophically informed, researchable at multiple levels of analysis, and is clearly no illusion given its robust consequences for human performance and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Sheldon and Goffredi also suggest that SDT has focused on social conditions affecting autonomous functioning, but less on the self-as-agent. We would agree, while also highlighting that SDT has been quite actively researching, and gaining important insights into, the "self-as-process." From its outset, SDT has seen the self as at the center of intrinsic motivation and active self-regulation. Recently SDT research on the self-as-process has expanded to include studies of mindful awareness, integrative emotion regulation, life goals, inner compass, need crafting, and self-talk, among other processes relevant to understanding health agency. Accompanying such research is strong interest in neurological mechanisms supporting volition and autonomy. So, with Sheldon and Goffredi, we hope research on self-development and volitional change continues, alongside work on social-contextual influences. In fact we see the two topics as inseparable, insofar as all action is contextual, and requires consideration of both the

person's inner resources and needs, as well as the affordances and obstacles the person faces. That is the organismic dialectic at the heart of SDT.

Pattell (2021) comments about the wide applicability of SDT's "universal" principles. Yet she also rightfully points out that there can be more "precision tailoring" of SDT's general models for different cultural, contextual, and individual differences. Soenens, Vansteenkiste, and Van Petegem (2015) describe SDT's approach as entailing "universalism without uniformity" in which the cross-cultural and cross-age effects of need satisfactions and frustrations are studied with an eye toward identifying possible differences in effect size and in moderators that can help in the precision tailoring process. Although SDT's claims concerning basic needs do represent emic or universal principles, these are expectably influenced by etic processes, or the unique conditions found within families and cultures (Reeve, Ryan, & Deci, 2018) that can help explain why people from different backgrounds, age groups, or personalities vary in their interpretation of events. At the base of SDT is the concept of *functional significance*—or as Sansone and Tang (2021) put it, an emphasis on the person's construal and affective experiences as these are connected to the core needs. Recently, the introduction of more fine-grained measures of need-supportive and need-thwarting practices (e.g., Aelterman et al., 2019) is shedding even more nuanced light on variations in individuals' need-based experiences as they connect with motivation, growth, and wellness.

Vallerand (2021) points to SDT's major contributions in focusing on basic human needs, in differentiating types of extrinsic motivation, and in researching human flourishing well before the advent of positive psychology. He also argues that SDT is not only a specific theory, but also a framework for broader person-centered studies. In this

regard, SDT has influenced a number of specific models including Vallerand's well-researched work on passion, as well as theories concerning goal progress, values, vitality, economic influences, and other topics. This provision of a general set of ideas underlying SDT's "Copernican turn" in studies of motivation and wellness is indeed a part of the theory's legacy, serving as a hub for novel research initiatives.

Sansone and Tang (2021) highlight that SDT's motivational taxonomy is complex, and that people have different configurations of motives. This is especially clear in profile analyses of SDT's motives (e.g., Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Sansone and Tang also suggest that when one's actions are experienced as a "fit" they are experienced as more autonomous. We agree conditionally, depending on how "fit" is defined. Many types of "fit" can be non-autonomous or need frustrating. For example, promotion motivation with a materialistic mindset might be a fit, but one without the benefits one might expect for reasons only SDT specifies. Similarly, we have never found that people with controlled motivations do better in a controlling environment (e.g., Delrue et al., 2019). "Match" and "fit" ideas are primarily based in social-cognitive theories, which lack specification of needs, or of integrative tendencies, whereas for SDT fit has a stronger meaning of *integration and congruence*. In fact, SDT goes beyond cognitive models to suggest that there are many social and cultural inputs that cannot be integrated because they ultimately conflict with basic needs.

**Taking stock.** We appreciate these positive reviews of SDT, and agree with our commentators that the theory's work is far from complete. We thus hope our SDT legacy article serves not as a coda, but instead as a springboard for yet further theorizing,

experimentation, and interventions that contribute to humanity in part through supporting people's autonomy to pursue what really matters to them.

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