

The tripartite structure of the meta-need for autonomy

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The need for autonomy was defined by Ryan and Deci (2017) as the desire to feel a sense of true volition and self-endorsement regarding what we do. Although this conceptualization proved to be extremely useful, the definition of the need for autonomy as involving mainly true-volition or self-endorsement may be incomplete. The purpose of this talk is to try to propose a more complete definition of the need for autonomy involving two additional components: (1) Having and realizing an authentic inner compass (AIC), and (2) Freedom to direct oneself. Actions satisfying these two autonomy aspects, and/or other needs and authentic personal inclinations, are posited to promote the experiences of true volition and self-endorsement, which further contributes to well-being and resilience.

Following a brief description of the three need autonomy components, I will present five reasons why the addition of the two components is important: (1) A logical-psychological argument: Freedom and AIC formation & realization are essential for true self-direction, (2) Freedom and AIC are important aspects of autonomy according to SDT, other psychological theories, and important philosophical analyses (e.g., Berlin, 1969). By including freedom and AIC in the concept of the meta-need for autonomy, we find a place within SDT for aspects of autonomy that other serious analyses have found important, and we also make SDT more internally consistent. (3) The concepts of true volition & self-endorsement do not specify what exactly people need to feel autonomous. Freedom and AIC do. (4) The concepts of freedom and AIC allow a much better distinction between the need for autonomy and other needs than does the concept of true volition & self-endorsement. Therefore, adding these components increases the explanatory and predictive power of the need for autonomy construct, (5) The concept of

AIC led to the introduction of important new aspects of autonomy support: Intrinsic value demonstration, and fostering inner valuing.

The last part will present empirical evidence supporting the tripartite conception. In this part, I will focus mainly on experimental and correlational evidence demonstrating the contribution of the experience of having and realizing an AIC to well-being and resilience, also when controlling for the effects of the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy as assessed by the Chen et al (2015) measure.

Theoretically and practically, distinguishing between the Freedom & AIC components of the meta-need for autonomy is important because each component requires the enactment of somewhat different autonomy-supportive practices, and has unique benefits.