

COMMENTARY

Work as a choice: Autonomous motivation and the basic income

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Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), as Huffmeier and Zacher (2021) briefly reference, can help to address an important question surrounding basic income (BI): *Will people continue to work for pay if they receive a BI?* Given evidence from over 40 years of SDT literature, we can make a persuasive case that individuals will choose to work, not merely *for pay* but to fulfill aspirations *beyond pay*. As a result, the presence of a BI has the potential to positively influence work motivation and reduce the strain that is associated with stressors, such as job insecurity, that arise from a lack of autonomy.

Historically, whether relying on metaphorical carrots or sticks, extrinsic factors were relied on as the dominant means of influencing workers. Following a path that was forged by humanistic psychology (e.g., Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory), additional attention to intrinsic sources of motivation has loosened the hold of a reward–punishment workplace mindset, highly reliant on extrinsic influences associated with the pursuit of money and job security. The presence of a BI may empower employees to pursue work in order to fulfill more authentic, intrinsic aspirations such as personal development, affiliation with others, contribution to a community, and personal meaning. In contrast, extrinsic motives, which are influenced by external properties such as rewards for performance, threats, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals that are found to decrease intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), may become less dominant. By establishing greater balance between extrinsic and intrinsic work aspirations, employees may be more likely to pursue opportunities that enable the fulfillment of three fundamental needs essential to the self-determination process: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If BI provides individuals a greater opportunity to fulfill fundamental needs, per SDT, an individual's motivation is more likely to be autonomous versus controlled.

Autonomous and controlled motivation are similar in that they both energize and direct behavior; however, the means by which behavior is inspired differs significantly. “When people are autonomously motivated they experience volition, or a self-endorsement of their actions . . . when people are controlled, they experience pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways” (Deci & Ryan, 2008b, p. 182). These external influences lead to a more external locus of control, thereby increasing perceptions of controlled motivation at the expense of autonomous motivation. By fundamentally altering the pressurized monetary expectations that are associated with our motivation to work, the BI has the power to shift our relationship with work. Workers will have greater opportunity to envision work as an autonomous choice as opposed to a requirement.

There are clear benefits to autonomous motivation that is characterized by self-ascribed goals. Those who are motivated by intrinsic aspirations have more interest, excitement, and confidence than those who are motivated by external goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This difference can manifest itself in enhanced persistence, creativity, and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). The effects of autonomous motivation are consistent even when controlling for perceived competence or

self-efficacy. In addition, autonomous motivation is positively associated with well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

When extrinsic goals are out of balance with intrinsic goals, negative relationships between extrinsic goals and well-being emerge (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In fact, even when extrinsic goals are achieved, they often have no effect on well-being, whereas intrinsic goal attainment is found to consistently enhance well-being (e.g., Sheldon et al., 2004). Similarly, Kahneman and Deaton (2010) found that the positive relationship of household income on emotional well-being is significant as families rise above the poverty line. However, the steep upward curve quickly levels off; more money does not buy more happiness as income approached the U.S. median. Given these findings, a BI that boosts individuals out of poverty would be most beneficial when individuals balance their pursuit of additional income with the pursuit of goals that are intrinsically interesting and important to them. A BI can provide the means for millions of individuals to find intrinsic meaning in work.

The BI also potentially frees individuals from the stress of employment that is contingent on the wild swings of the labor market. The effects of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and 2008 global financial crisis on stress-related health outcomes warrant our continued attention. The negative effects of both the threat of job loss and a lack of power to ameliorate the threat associated with job insecurity may be buffered by BI. Additionally, Carver and Baird (1998) described insecurity as a reason why extrinsic goals may be pursued for the wrong reasons. They attributed a decrease in well-being to the pursuit of extrinsic goals in the face of insecurity. Goh et al. (2016) found that job insecurity increased the likelihood of individuals reporting poor health by 50%. This chronic stress contributes significantly to an estimated annual \$200 billion in extra health care costs in the United States alone (Goh et al., 2015, 2016). Policy interventions to address this issue, such as the BI, are warranted.

The BI is precisely the type of intervention that is called for by cognitive evaluation theory (CET). CET, a subtheory of SDT, is focused on social and environmental factors that undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CET assumes that intrinsic motivation can flourish unless it is sabotaged by environmental conditions. The BI should be investigated within this framework as a social and economic intervention.

Self-determination theory provides a persuasive theoretical foundation on which to predict the positive influence of a BI on the work environment, individuals' autonomous motivation, and employee well-being. Years ago, Ryan and Deci (1985) theorized that intrinsic motivation is more likely to occur in a setting characterized by a sense of security, relatedness, competence, and autonomy. A BI may move our workplaces closer to the ideal in which employees are empowered to better balance the pursuit of money and security with the pursuit of personal growth, meaning, and contribution to others. Overall, a BI can have a positive influence on the motivation and opportunity to engage in meaningful work, resulting in increased productivity, health, and well-being.

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