



Assumptions about Human Motivation have Consequences for Practice

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ABSTRACT Management practice is informed by fundamental assumptions about human motivation. We review two contrasting perspectives: agency theory – which assumes that humans are self-interested rational beings whose actions should be constrained to achieve organizational goals (which are opposing) – and self-determination theory – which assumes that individuals will thrive when they have autonomy to pursue activities and can internalize external goals when their needs are satisfied. We highlight how the assumptions of agency theory continue to dominate the design and implementation of management practices and management education, despite decades of evidence that individuals are not solely driven by economic rationality. We suggest that attempts to refine these assumptions have so far fallen short of adequately representing human motivation and highlight an important aspect of self-determination theory which is often neglected from these debates: how people come to internalize goals. Placing motivation internalization as more central to management thinking yields practices that more effectively align the interests of employees and organizations.

Keywords: motivation assumptions, agency theory, self-determination theory, management practice

INTRODUCTION

Organizational decision makers value employees who are intrinsically motivated in their work (Derfler-Rozin and Pitesa, 2020) and competent to achieve goals with minimum supervision. Yet, many management practices are designed on the basis that individuals will not make valuable contributions without interventions to motivate them. Compensation, for example, is often designed on the basis that ‘the overwhelming majority of workers would

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not otherwise perform the tasks' (Lazear, 2018, p. 195), despite evidence that 76 per cent of people say they would continue to work even if they did not need money (Paulsen, 2008). This illustrates a contradiction between managerial beliefs and the reality of human motivation for work, which permeates management practice: on the one hand, it is assumed that people are extrinsically motivated to work, and we should therefore use management controls to motivate high performance, yet on the other leaders want intrinsically motivated people because they value this characteristic as a means to achieve higher performance.

With this essay we do not intend to enter the debate about whether different types of motivation are or are not compatible (e.g., Deci et al., 2017; Gerhart and Fang, 2015). Rather, we examine the motivational assumptions organizational leaders carry when they design management research, practice and education. With this, we ask management scholars and organizational leaders to be more aware that their decisions are based on assumptions they hold about human motivation, and we highlight that these decisions have an impact on employees and organizations. This is important not only because management research, practice and education may be too narrowly focused on one set of assumptions while ignoring the other, but also because these assumptions have far-reaching societal consequences. We opened with an example on the design of compensation systems because it has often been evoked following financial scandals; the 2008 financial crisis, the demise of Enron, and a more recent public inquiry into the financial sector in Australia have all named incentive systems as a major cause of behavioural problems (e.g., gaming, fraud, moral disengagement) that negatively affect society in general (Hayne, 2019; Heath, 2009; Pfeffer, 1998, 2004). We wonder if these scandals would have been avoided if the people involved in the design of compensation held different fundamental motivational assumptions. In other words, did we create this reality, and could we change it?

We focus on two theories that have diametrically opposed assumptions about human motivation, and that have been influential in both theoretical and practical management discourse: agency theory and self-determination theory (SDT). Interestingly these two theories were created in the same decade at the University of Rochester Business School (New York, USA), and the authors at the time did not see eye to eye, probably because the theories they were independently developing were underpinned by opposite assumptions about human motivation (Gagné, 2022).^[1] Agency theory and SDT offer different solutions to motivational problems. According to agency theory, the only way to align the goals of agents (managers) to the goals of the principals (owners) is to use control mechanisms, such as rules, monitoring, and rewards; using control mechanisms is the way to ensure that agents behave honestly and with integrity (Fourcade and Khurana, 2017). History now shows this advice may have been misguided. First, plenty of evidence demonstrates that CEO incentives are not strongly linked to company performance (Dalton et al., 2003; Donaldson and Davis, 1991). Second, many financial scandals have been attributed to practices based on agency theory. For example, boards and executives have been incentivized to report company financial performance to shareholders in ways that influence share value fluctuations (Fourcade and Khurana, 2017). Jensen and his colleagues attributed this to a failure to properly select executives for their integrity (Erhard et al., 2017) and for using insufficient controls in place to cull gaming of the system (Jensen, 2003).

While Jensen stated that scholars have not yet found solutions to integrity and gaming issues (Deutsch, 2005), SDT has been there all along to offer an alternative way to motivate agents; by promoting an internalization process that leads to self-driven motivation (Deci et al., 1994). Promoting the autonomy of agents, rather than their control, is the key to fostering the internalization of organizational goals (Gagné, 2018). In essence, internalization implies that agents find meaning in working towards organizational goals and act to realize them in self-transcendent ways. For example, evidence using a commons dilemma game found that, when people have internalized the goals of the ‘commons’, they are more likely to maintain resources for the commons instead of maximizing their own gains (Sheldon and McGregor, 2000). In other words, internalization provides an alternative to control mechanisms to align goals between principals and agents. For this reason, we suggest that SDT solves the ‘problems’ that agency theory cannot when dealing with motivational issues in organizations.

However, there is evidence that we tend to view others as more extrinsically motivated than ourselves (Heath, 1999), which may help perpetuate the dominance of agency-based assumptions. Deci and Flaste (1995, p. 148) argued that *‘if you control people enough, they may begin to act as if they want to be controlled. As a self-protective strategy, they become focused outward – looking for clues about what the people in one-up positions expect of them, looking for what will keep them out of trouble’* (an idea which also finds empirical support; Besser, 1995). This has longer-term implications such that people act out of self-interest when they think that is what is expected of them (Ratner and Miller, 2001). As Ferraro et al. (2005) have highlighted, this assumption that individuals are self-interested is enshrined in the language and assumptions which underpin management scholarship, which is then self-fulfilling in the design of institutions and practices to meet these assumptions.

The goals of this essay are therefore not only to highlight the limits of the dominant assumptions about motivation in management science (which other scholars have also discussed: Ferraro et al., 2005) but more specifically to illustrate how SDT’s recognition of the complexity of human motivation provides a more nuanced basis for the design of management practice and education, which offers the opportunity to achieve both organizational and individual goals without recourse to coercive management controls. Before illustrating the implications of agency theory’s assumptions for management education, the behaviour of shareholders, the behaviour of employees, and for public policy on employment, we summarize the main premises of each theory and contrast their assumptions. We finish with a discussion of the impetus to rethink motivational assumptions in management to create a better future for employees.

Agency Theory

Agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) grew out of an increasing preponderance of non-manager owners hiring non-owners to manage their firm (i.e., the separation of ownership and control; Bendickson et al., 2016). The theory was designed to answer a question yet unresolved by bureaucratic methods of regulating employee behaviour (Bendickson et al., 2016; Fourcade and Khurana, 2017): how to align the goals of firm

owners and managers. To answer this question, agency theory settled on a set of goals that owners (principals) and managers (agents) have, and based on these goals, the type of relationship (contract) that can bring them together to cooperate in the pursuit of a common goal. This goal is the welfare of the firm, operationalized as profits. This view of the welfare of the firm stems from Jensen and Meckling's education in the 'Chicago School of Economics', under the supervision of Milton Friedman. Friedman argued that the only social responsibility of a corporation is to make profits. Agents cannot therefore act in socially responsible ways because it would mean deciding on alternative use of wealth that is not theirs (Friedman, 2007).

Given the assumption that a business owner's main motive is to increase wealth, relinquishing control over the management of the organization to agents means asking someone else to provide their skills and effort to increase that wealth. However, building skills and expanding effort is costly, and it is assumed that people do not have any good reason to provide skill and effort to owners. To extract this effort, owners must therefore use control mechanisms that generally include incentives (money in exchange for performance), monitoring (e.g., audits, performance appraisals) and controls (e.g., policies and procedures). These control mechanisms are costly to principals and reduce their wealth. To increase the effectiveness of control mechanisms, owners can make agents' incentives dependent on business profits or give them shares in the business. This should lead to better goal alignment between principals and agents. However, when outcomes are difficult to assess by owners, managers can selectively report information, so further monitoring and other forms of controls become necessary.

Management control systems include personnel control mechanisms (e.g., selection and training), action/results control mechanisms (e.g., procedures, budgets, the use of key performance indicators, compliance reporting, monitoring, access to information, and incentives), cultural control mechanisms (e.g., dress code, language, symbols; Merchant, 1998), and strategic/belief controls (strategy, mission, planning; Merchant and Van der Stede, 2007; Simons, 1995).^[2] Management controls have been shown to yield employees' trust in the organization as they signal organizational goodwill and ability (Verburg et al., 2018; Weibel et al., 2016). However, management control theory tends to rely on a cybernetic model of worker motivation (Lord and Hanges, 1987) where workers compare current to ideal states and act to correct any differential. Combined with agency theory, this view aims to connect employee behaviour to organizational goals by aligning interests through incentives and providing information to workers about their progress. There have also been arguments (Bosse and Phillips, 2016) that self-interest is bounded by social goals because management control practices are only effective if they are perceived as fair by agents.

Though agency theory was initially developed to focus on the relationship between owners and top managers, it has been used extensively in economics, finance, accounting and human resource management to craft practices meant to rapidly increase wealth (Dalton et al., 2003) and manage employees to this end (Barkema and Gomez-Mejia, 1998; Nyberg et al., 2010). A macro result of this has been the rise of public ownership of the firm. At the meso and micro levels the ongoing influence of agency theory can be seen in the widespread teaching of management control systems design in business schools and the deployment of accounting practices (management control

systems) to monitor agent decisions and behaviours have become the gold standard in good governance (Fourcade and Khurana, 2017; Merchant, 1998).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) was born out of research on the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation, defined as doing something out of enjoyment and interest (see Gagné, 2022; Gagné and Deci, 2014 for historical accounts). Edward Deci (1971) was interested in accounts of seemingly intrinsically motivated behaviours in animals that appeared to contradict previous motivation theories, such as operant learning and drive theories (Hull, 1943; Skinner, 1953). Through a series of experiments, Deci (1971, 1972) found that, when rewarded for the task, human participants subsequently showed less intrinsic motivation for a fun puzzle activity (indicated by time spent on the puzzles during a free-choice behaviour period as well as self-reported interest and enjoyment) than at baseline, which Deci attributed to a decrease in experienced self-determination or autonomy. More studies followed, showing other contextual factors, such as threats, deadlines, imposed goals, surveillance, evaluations, and competition, also diminished feelings of autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Amabile et al., 1976; Deci, 1972; Deci et al., 1981; Enzle and Anderson, 1993; Lepper and Greene, 1975; Mossholder, 1980). Meta-analytic results supported the idea that the more tangible and contingent on behaviour a reward is, the more detrimental it is to intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999; Lehtivuori, 2022). Thus, SDT would argue that there is a risk associated with the use of control mechanisms to motivate employees, such that the more autonomy-thwarting controls are likely to lead to negative motivational consequences (Pfister and Lukka, 2019).

An important further development of the theory grew out of the observation that sometimes people 'freely' engaged in an activity for ego-involved reasons (i.e., doing something to prove one's self-worth; Ryan et al., 1983, 1991). This led to the addition of a proposition that human beings not only have a tendency for intrinsic motivation but also to internalize the value of activities that are initially externally imposed (Schafer, 1968), creating a kind of 'internally driven' extrinsic motivation. Internalization is a process that is well-recognized in developmental psychology to describe the process by which children learn norms and behaviours that are necessary for co-existence and societal order (Hoffman, 1985). Two forms of internalization were proposed, one leading to a self-esteem-based type of motivation, termed introjected regulation, the other describing a deeper internalization process whereby people endorse the value of an uninteresting but important activity, termed identified regulation (Plant and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Connell, 1989). This internalization process holds the key to replacing control mechanisms that hamper autonomy, as we explain later. A recent meta-analysis found that intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation most associated with positive work outcomes, but identified regulation was also strongly positively associated with them, and particularly with performance. Meanwhile, introjected regulation and external regulation (which is defined as doing something for rewards) are much less strongly associated (or are negatively associated) with positive work outcomes (Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

Another key proposition within SDT is that, even though intrinsic motivation and internalization are natural tendencies, human beings need to feel competent (i.e., experiencing mastery of one's environment), autonomous (i.e., experiencing volition; feeling like the agent of one's own behaviour), and related to others (i.e., a sense of belonging) to support these natural tendencies (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In the way we don't pull on a plant to make it grow, individuals should not be pushed into being motivated; rather, competence, autonomy, and relatedness provide the nutrients to support people's natural tendencies to motivate themselves (Deci & Flaste, 1995). The satisfaction of these three 'basic psychological needs' has been found to consistently associate with intrinsic and identified motivation, as well as a range of positive work-related outcomes including wellbeing and performance (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). The concepts of internalization and need satisfaction are particularly important for our understanding of management practices that foster the internalization of externally set goals or job requirements even when they relate to tasks or activities which are not inherently interesting or enjoyable (which may be the case for work related tasks which are important but not interesting). More recent research has uncovered mechanisms by which people transform external demands into internal goals (Hewett, 2023): internalization begins with a sense of cognitive dissonance arising from having to do a task which is not intrinsically motivating. Internalization occurs through a process of reflecting on the reason for engaging in a task and reframing this (e.g., seeing a challenge as an opportunity to learn). This transformation occurs through the support or frustration of psychological needs, into internalized or non-internalized motivation.

Although (as we discuss later) SDT has not been as widely influential as agency theory on management practice, the influence of basic psychological need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation can be in multiple ways. Dan Pink's book 'Drive' (2010), for example, draws directly from SDT and has become one of the best-selling management books of the past decade (and the related YouTube video has gained almost 20 million views as of the end of 2023; RSA Animate, 2010), influencing organizations and business schools in the design of practices and education. The principles of designing work to satisfy individuals' needs and placing autonomy at the forefront of organizational design can also be seen in recent resurgence in interest in self-managing organizations (e.g., Hamel and Zanini, 2020) and in discussions about how to support employees through the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Brafford and Ryan, 2020).

CONTRASTING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN MOTIVATION

Agency and self-determination theories hold assumptions about human motivation that are diametrically opposed. Before we elaborate each set of assumptions, we must clarify the concept of control and autonomy used across agency and self-determination theories. In agency theory, the freedom of agents is defined as independence: agents can do whatever they want without constraint. Independence therefore needs to be restricted through control mechanisms to ensure alignment with organizational goals (Merchant, 1998). But in SDT, autonomy is defined as being self-determined, self-ruled or self-organized and characterized by a feeling of volition; of being the origin of one's own behavioural choices (deCharms, 1968).

Independence and autonomy have been positioned as orthogonal constructs (Chirkov et al., 2003), such that individuals provided with high levels of independence can experience low volition if they do not have clear guidance; experiencing a so-called burden of choice (Warr, 1987). Individuals can also experience high volition even if their independence is bound by the constraints of organizational goals, if they feel a sense of choice over how to pursue those goals (Aeltermann et al., 2019). In fact, autonomy (volition) yields better motivational outcomes in conjunction with 'structure' (Jang et al., 2010; Koestner et al., 1984), which includes goals, expectations, guidance, and limit setting. A key determinant is how this structure is provided and enforced: structure can be coercive (e.g., by enforcing inflexible and/or opaque rules or procedures; Adler and Borys, 1996) or autonomy-supportive (e.g., by providing a meaningful rationale for the structure, enabling opportunities for how outcomes are reached, and allowing for feedback; Williams and Deci, 1996). In summary, control is meant to limit independence in agency theorizing while structure coupled with autonomy-support in SDT is meant to promote the internalization of rules and goals (Chou et al., 2017; Koestner et al., 1984). These fundamentally different assumptions manifest in different areas of management research and practice, in terms of sources of motivation, the function of rationality, the alignment of goals, definitions of welfare, and relationship rules. We address each in turn (see Table I).

Sources of Motivation

The basic assumption in agency theory that humans are rational, economic beings (*homo economicus*) means that agents are required to be compensated for the effort they expend on behalf of the principal; in other words, their motivation is inherently extrinsic (driven by promise of reward or risk of sanction). However, because agent performance can be difficult or onerous to monitor and cannot be inherently trusted to have intentions that are aligned with the goals of the principals (Ferraro et al., 2005; Heath, 2009), other control mechanisms are added, such as rules and reporting requirements. In contrast, SDT assumes that individuals can experience a wide range of motivations, which can vary from task to task and context to context. Individuals' motivation therefore ranges from more autonomous (driven by intrinsic interest or internalized goals) or more controlled (driven by internal ego-involved pressure, or external reward/sanction). Autonomous motivation can be nurtured with managerial approaches that satisfy psychological needs,

Table I. The contrasting assumptions of agency and self-determination theory

<i>Assumption about...</i>	<i>Agency theory</i>	<i>Self-determination theory</i>
Sources of Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic and Extrinsic (more or less internalized)
Rationality	Rational and calculative	Driven by internal needs
Goal Alignment	Agents and principals have different goals	Agents can internalize the goals of principals
Welfare	Capital firm growth	Optimal human functioning
Relationship Rules	Economic exchange	Economic/social exchange, or communal

such as empowering or participative leadership styles, providing enriched work, and constructive performance feedback (e.g., Leroy et al., 2015; Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

Rationality

According to agency theory, agents will rationally maximize their own gains, which is why they cannot be trusted to do what is best for principals. It is argued that humans do not have basic needs, only wants and desires (Jensen and Meckling, 1994). The fact that an unfulfilled desire (such as lack of adequate housing) leads to negative outcomes is treated as a cost; a matter of trade-off. SDT explains that people are intrinsically motivated to spend energy on activities that stimulate their nervous system, such as exploration behaviours and play. Thus, if an agent is genuinely interested and enjoys the work offered by the principal, they are likely to do it, which is costly and therefore not rational. Nor is moral action, which would be based on an internalization process (Fabes et al., 1989; Grusec and Goodnow, 1994). The internalization process, driven by need satisfaction, is proposed to influence behavioural choices in a way to maximize gains in learning (competence), relationship building (relatedness), and experiencing meaning (autonomy; Hewett, 2023). A more recent elaboration of agency theory, behavioural agency theory (Pepper and Gore, 2015), refutes the rationality assumption in agency theory by arguing that agents' rationality is bounded by decision biases such as loss aversion, inequity aversion, time discounting, and intrinsic motivation. This is particularly important because it incorporates the possibility that agents can be intrinsically motivated for their work, and that controls in the form of incentives can negatively impact this (Frey and Jegen, 2001). This extension does not, however, explain how individuals come to be intrinsically motivated for their work. SDT fixes this lacuna by proposing basic psychological needs as a requirement for intrinsic motivation, as explained in an earlier section.

Goal Alignment

Agency theory argues that control mechanisms are necessary to align the goals of the principals to the goals of agents, as they are assumed to be naturally misaligned. That is, agents are only self-interested in maximizing their own gain (Miller, 1999). Recognizing the limitations of this assumption, stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997) argues that managers can either be agents or stewards. Stewards hold collective goals, which are more aligned to those of principals, and the realization of organizational goals is a means to also meet their own individual needs, so they are more likely to cooperate, show loyalty and act less opportunistically (Heath, 2009). If managers are stewards, they can be trusted (thus social exchange rules can apply), and it is therefore better to use more empowering forms of governance structures (rather than strict rules and monitoring) that nurture their sense of autonomy. Stewardship theory has been proposed to palliate the source of motivation issue in agency theory as it highlights managers' intrinsic motivation (Davis et al., 1997). Stewardship theory, though, conflates intrinsic and internalized extrinsic motivation and implies that intrinsic motivation is stable (such that managers are either agents or stewards). These limitations are important because SDT suggests that the goals of principals – which may not

be intrinsically interesting – can be internalized under the right conditions which is only possible if these forms of motivation are malleable. In particular, when agents' needs are satisfied, for example through the provision of a clear rationale for the task, choice in how to complete it, and the principal acknowledging the agents' perspective in setting and communicating the goal (Deci et al., 1994), they are more likely to be autonomously motivated to pursue externally set goals (see Koestner and Hope, 2014 for more discussion on this topic).

Welfare

Agency theory defines the welfare of principals as capital growth and the welfare of agents as personal gain. This definition of welfare has been criticized for promoting an 'ends justify the means' approach to business management where any action is justified if it leads to capital growth or personal gain (Pfeffer, 2004). Subsequent agency-based governance models have integrated a more comprehensive stakeholder-focused definition of firm-level welfare that encompasses the interests not only of shareholders, but also of employees, clients, suppliers, local communities, and the environment (Freeman et al., 2010). In contrast, SDT defines welfare as 'human' rather than 'financial' welfare (Walsh et al., 2003) by operationalizing it as optimal functioning, defined as 'the manifestation of intra- and interpersonal growth and development in terms of employee well-being, attitudes, and behavior' (Van den Broeck et al., 2019, p. 519). Although the majority of research has focused on individual level welfare outcomes, motivation internalization can be seen as particularly important for group or organizational welfare such that when individuals have internalized their motivation for work, they give attention to the needs of others (Hewett, 2023) and are more likely to contribute proactive performance to organizational goals (Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

Relationship Rules

Relationship rules dictate how we interact and transact with other people. Mills and Clark (1982) distinguished between communal and exchange relationships. Communal relationships do not hold any exchange expectations (one party is willing to provide goods and services solely on the basis of the recipient's needs). Exchange relationships can be distinguished between economic and social exchange. Economic exchange is a basic goods-for-services relationship, whereas social exchange is defined by an implicit understanding that providing goods or rendering services does not need to be paid for or reciprocated in kind in the medium to long-term (Gneezy, 2003). Agency theory acknowledges only one form of relationship rule, based on economic exchange as agents exert effort in exchange for financial compensation (Ferraro et al., 2005). In contrast, SDT highlights that all types of exchange are present, depending on the nature of the agents' motivation for the activity. Economic exchange is present in external motivation. Social exchange is represented in internalized motivation which is driven either by the expectation of approval-based return for effort (introjected motivation) or the achievement of personal goals of values (identified motivation). Finally, communal exchange is present in intrinsic motivation and identified motivation

such that individuals provide effort only because they truly want to (Grant, 2008; Hewett, 2023).

RETHINKING THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT INFLUENCE PRACTICE

In this section, we illustrate how agency theory assumptions permeate practice even though many of the basic assumptions of this theory are contradicted by an established body of empirical work utilizing SDT (e.g., Donaldson and Davis, 1991; Falk and Kosfeld, 2006; Henrich et al., 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2016, 2021). We analyse five examples of how assumptions from agency theory have had significant influence on institutions and practices: 1) business school curricula, 2) the motivation of principals, 3) over-reliance on other control mechanisms, 4) the design of compensation systems, and 5) unemployment services. We explain how differing theoretical assumptions might change these areas of practices, with a particular focus on how SDT might overcome specific practical issues. We chose these specific areas as we see challenges and opportunities relevant to management science and practice here. We could have focused on more practices, some of which have been covered elsewhere (e.g., performance appraisals, Evans and Tourish, 2017; organizational structure, Sherman and Smith, 1984; and the employment 'market', Feldman, 2000).

Business School Curricula

Business school education has consequences. On the one hand, business schools represent a multidisciplinary knowledge base, bringing together insights from disciplines including economics, mathematics, sociology, and psychology, to address the complexity of businesses and their environment, with the potential to create social change (Starkey and Tempest, 2009). Yet, with great power comes great responsibility: organizations with more MBA graduates in their top management teams tend to violate occupational safety and health regulations more frequently (Williams et al., 2000); economics students are more likely to free-ride in public goods dilemma experiments, more likely to keep resources for themselves, and are easier to corrupt (Marwell and Ames, 1981), while business school students are 50 per cent more likely to cheat on their university assessments relative to students in other disciplines (Carter and Irons, 1991; Frank and Schulze, 2000; McCabe and Linda, 1995). Consequences for business students go beyond questionable behaviour: they also tend to have lower wellbeing and higher substance use than other university students (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006b). This has led to many calls (over many years) for business schools to better recognize their societal role (Walsh, 2003) including a radical overhaul of global business education (e.g., Ghosal, 2005; Parker, 2018). We suggest that one key priority is to revisit the motivational assumptions which underpin management curricula. Agency theory permeates many disciplines taught in business schools, and students are consistently exposed to norms stating that self-interest is natural and rational, honesty is effortful, and that financial welfare is the be-all-and-end-all (Ferraro et al., 2005; Ong et al., 2023; Tay et al., 2023). These norms risk fostering a dominant 'bottom-line mentality' ('*1-dimensional thinking that revolves around securing bottom-line outcomes to the neglect of competing priorities*'; Greenbaum et al., 2012, p. 343) which can drive performance but also self-interested, non-collaborative, and unethical

behaviour (see Greenbaum et al., 2023 for a review). Indeed, the over-focus on self-interest has been shown to weaken the ‘moral character’ of students and their focus on financial welfare over human welfare (Amernic and Craig, 2004; Krishnan, 2008; Pfeffer, 2004; Walsh et al., 2003). Around the 1990’s, following the alarm bells triggered by an increasing number of financial scandals as well as other ethically questionable practices in organizations, some of which with devastating consequences (e.g., the fatalities which arose from unethical yet incentive-driven behaviour in the production of the Ford Pinto car; Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011), business school curricula started including business ethics and corporate social responsibility as a counterweight (Gioia, 2002). However, simply adding ethics and responsibility to the curriculum is a band-aid solution to the problem and could even lead to confusion in business school students who end up dealing with irreconcilable assumptions across their courses (Giacalone and Thompson, 2006). This is unlikely to make any ethics content stick.

The motivational assumptions which underpin SDT allow for a more holistic approach to business education. For example, classes such as organizational behaviour and human resource management can draw on a wealth of knowledge about how practices can be designed and implemented to nurture need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation or internalization (e.g., Kuvaas et al., 2014; Kuvaas and Dysvik, 2009); strategy-related classes can take inspiration from research on how bureaucratic systems can be designed to enable rather than coerce (Adler and Borys, 1996), and how organizations can be designed to nurture more autonomous motivation (O’Grady, 2019); accounting classes benefits from insights about how management controls can be designed to enhance rather than diminish intrinsic and identified motivation (Adler and Chen, 2011); and arguments for why economics-based courses need to move away from the *homo economicus* assumption, which positions humans only as rationale beings (Ong et al., 2023). In short, there is a wealth of empirical and theoretical research which draws on SDT which can inspire those involved in business education to move beyond the basic, and flawed, assumptions from agency theory which still dominate. The small number of examples we draw on here offers potential for more complete understanding of human motivation across business education, which moves beyond the band-aid approach to ethics to a more holistic overhaul of basic assumptions which supports the achievement of the goals of the organization while also recognizing human agency and societal goals (Giacalone and Thompson, 2006).

How the Motivation of Principals Influences Agents

Agency theory has contributed to the promotion the rise of public ownership, which leads to the diffusion of responsibility amongst multiple owners (i.e., principals) of the firm who typically buy shares with the sole purpose of rapidly increasing their wealth (Pfeffer, 2004). By creating ‘in-and-out stakeholders’ with no social or psychological ties to the firm, it has reinforced the idea that firms have no other responsibilities than self-interest (Fourcade and Khurana, 2017; Heath, 2009). The multiplicity of shareholders with very few ‘large’ ones makes them less likely to spend energy and resources closely monitoring agents (Shleifer and Vishny, 1986). This influences how firms are managed with a focus on high levels of management control in the form of short-term financial goals; goals that are less likely to be internalized by agents (Clarke, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006a). Even though agents,

particularly those dealing directly with principals are often principals themselves because they are compensated with shares (to align their goals to business owners), it has not proven to translate into greater shareholder wealth (Walsh and Seward, 1990).

The first consequence of shareholders' motivation to make quick financial gains is a stronger contingent, control-based approach to motivating agents; focusing on extrinsic reward and sanction. The second consequence is the principals' psychological distance from agents leading them to view agents as merely containers of skills (referred to as human capital) and relationships are networks available for exploitation (referred to as social capital) with no regard for the importance of nurturing employees' rights to free will, their identities and values, and their desire to be part of a community (Wright, 2021). We note that these criticisms correspond to the three psychological needs set out in SDT, which are the ingredients needed for employees to internalize organizational goals (Gagné, 2018). The focus on employees as a resource therefore undermines these basic psychological needs which means that they are less likely to internalize the goals of the principals (Hewett, 2023). In essence, this amounts to shareholders shooting themselves in the foot when it comes to aligning the goals of employees to those of the organization (i.e., their goals).

Over-Reliance on Coercive Control Mechanisms

Management controls are an inherent part of organization life: as soon as groups of individuals come together with a shared goal, mechanisms are required to establish norms and expectations which aid the pursuit of that goal. However, the amount and nature of management controls can vary hugely, as can therefore the implications of these. The dominance of agency theory has contributed to an over-reliance on controls designed to coerce, rather than those designed to enable. Coercive controls limit the range of behaviours employees are allowed to enact and limit their decision latitude by directing them to do the work in specific ways, evaluating their performance to correct deviations, and disciplining them through rewards and punishments (Edwards, 1979). Enabling controls, in contrast, communicate goals and promote their internalization (thereby making the use of rewards and punishments to get employee cooperation redundant) while using participative forms of decision making to best utilize employees' knowledge and skills (which are enhanced by developmentally focused performance evaluations). The continued dominance of coercive controls can be seen in to case of, for example, management by algorithms (Kellogg et al., 2020) and employee monitoring (Ravid et al., 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in some of these forms of control as employees were often less visible due to social distancing measures and increased home working (Delfino and van der Kolk, 2021). The continued reliance on these forms of controls emerges from the basic assumption that honesty is not natural and that individuals are not naturally inclined to deliver on their personal or collective goals without these controls in place (Ong et al., 2023). As we have discussed, these fundamental assumptions are flawed given decades of evidence about intrinsic and internalized motivation. For example, a dominant assumption which permeates research and practice is that objective performance measures (e.g., performance metrics, key performance indicators) are perceived as fairer than

more subjective measures, which are seen as incomplete. However, empirical evidence suggests that managers perceive subjective performance measures as more enabling if they are seen as a means to an end (Jordan and Messner, 2012) and employees receiving financial incentives based on subjective measures perceive these as fairer than those based on objective measures in the context of complex work (Hewett and Leroy, 2019).

Adopting the motivational assumptions underpinned by SDT does not mean removing management controls altogether, but rather reconsidering the way that management controls are used and designed. SDT would acknowledge that, in the context of organizations, employees need to have goals that align with organizational goals, and some forms of 'controls' can help guide their behaviour by providing them with information about what to focus their energy on and how to acceptably do so (Aelterman et al., 2019; Koestner et al., 1984). However, in SDT terms, controls are usually considered as 'structure' or 'guidance' and contrasted with 'laissez-faire' or 'chaos' (Aelterman et al., 2019). In other words, SDT advocates for autonomy with structure as the best way to appropriately motivate workers (Gagné, 2018). Redesigning controls to fit these principles can be achieved by focusing on autonomy supportive behaviour when implementing such controls. Safety management is a good case in point. It is insufficient to explain *what* is dangerous and *how* to avoid hazards. One must also endorse why safety measures are put in place and endorsement is usually fostered by explaining *why* the measures work (e.g., what the consequences of wearing goggles are if you wear them versus if you do not, and why wearing goggles are better despite their inconvenience, with inconveniences dealt with as much as possible). Such an approach has proven to be more efficient and sustainable (Griffin and Hu, 2013; Scott et al., 2014).

Other forms of management control can also be redesigned with internalization in mind. Take for example 'action controls' (such as card locks, passwords, the separation of duties so that individual employees only have limited information access, and codes of conduct). Some of these practices go against the principles of motivational work design (Parker, 2014) by reducing skill variety and usage, task identity and significance, and job autonomy, all of which have been associated with motivation, performance, retention, and wellbeing outcomes (Humphrey et al., 2006; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Scholars of management control theory have already argued for the use of personnel and cultural controls (e.g., hire well, train well, create strong norms through the physical environment, dress codes and language) over action controls when it is possible (Abernethy and Brownell, 1997). The rationale for this advice is that action controls are more expensive and can have harmful side effects because they tend to be more autonomy-thwarting than personnel, cultural, and beliefs/strategic controls (Löbach, 2020; Pfister and Lukka, 2019; Speklé et al., 2017; van der Kolk et al., 2019). These harmful effects include increased stress and reduced adaptivity and innovation, and even reduced autonomous work motivation (Chen et al., 2020). Though these are important acknowledgements, no theoretical explanation is given as to why cultural controls are effective and why action controls can cause harm. SDT can answer both questions: motivation internalization is critical for cultural controls to shape behaviour, and research on motivation internalization can help explain how to promote

this internalization. It can also explain why action controls can cause harm, because they hamper people's sense of volition, thereby negatively affecting both the intrinsic motivation and internalization tendencies.

Compensation Systems Design

One particular form of management control which gains significant attention in the context of motivation is compensation. Compensation systems design is complex. A long-time problem has been that workplace incentives often yield unintended consequences, such as interpersonal workplace conflict, and moral disengagement (Glaeser and Van Quaquebeke, 2019; Gläser et al., 2017; Pfeffer, 1998, 2004). The common solutions for these problems have been to ensure that not only quantity but also quality of performance is rewarded, and accompanied by the communication of clearer criterion, closer monitoring, and refined performance measures (e.g., efficiency wage theory; Akerlof, 1982). However, it is fighting a losing battle to further refine and adjust these reward systems as another problem pops up. There is only so much that managers can do to completely specify desired behaviour (Hewett and Leroy, 2019) and ignore the creativity of people when it comes to finding ways to get to the outcome they want (i.e., the reward). Examples abound, from smashing windshields to sell more of them, to teachers artificially inflating student scores on standardized tests, to the use of creative accounting practices (Amernic and Craig, 2004; Jacob and Levitt, 2003; Newman et al., 2020). Baker et al. (1988) argued that incentive systems often work 'too well' in that detailed designs are needed for them to work as intended; in other words, you get what you pay for. This illustrates a basic assumption which permeates compensation design; that people only 'react' to their environments.

If one were instead to take the view that we can nurture people's natural tendencies towards intrinsic motivation and internalization (i.e., people are not only reactive but proactive), it would suggest a different solution to the 'problem'. Instead of designing compensation mechanisms which aim to coerce and control, what if the solution was to instead use mechanisms that could foster the internalization of a company's goals? Instead of only focusing on what is rewarded, sometimes taking short-cuts, gaming the systems, or engaging in immoral behaviour to do so, if employees' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were supported, they would be more likely to have a broader view of their organizational role, take responsibility for their actions, and proactively find innovative solutions to organizational challenges (Parker et al., 2010).

For example, when pay-for-performance schemes are not strongly related to performance, the cause is often assumed to be a lack of instrumentality (i.e., not contingent enough on performance). One solution has been to link rewards to behaviours (e.g., giving clients honest information and options about a product) rather than linking them to results (e.g., sales; Anderson and Oliver, 1987). Though focusing on behaviours may help avoid unwanted behaviours, such as moral disengagement, it does require more extensive monitoring, which can reduce feelings of autonomy (Gagné and Bhave, 2011). Today's work requires people to do more complex work and be more adaptive and proactive (Gagné et al., 2022), behaviours that are unlikely to be promoted through behaviour-based rewards (Hewett and Leroy, 2019). Though

rewards can be a way to signal what the organization values, there are other ways to signal it as well, such as through a clearly and consistently communicated organizational purpose (Jasinenko and Steuber, 2022). Promoting the internalization of the value of certain types of behaviours through belief and cultural control mechanisms (e.g., adequate communication that offers a rationale and role models) might solve the problem at the source.

Although there is a large body of research applying SDT to the question of compensation design (see Deci et al., 2017; Gagné and Forest, 2008), there remains a significant divide in the research community between proponents of agency theory-based and SDT-based perspectives. This is largely due to a relatively narrow debate about whether or not pay should be contingent on performance (reflecting the historical roots of SDT; Deci et al., 1999), which fails to recognize important nuance in the definition of motivation set out by SDT. In particular, most research has focused on whether or not contingent pay undermines intrinsic motivation and has given very little attention to internalized motivation or the ways in which compensation design might contribute to the internalization process. Moving beyond the relatively basic agency-based assumptions in compensation design might allow more integration of theory on how external incentives can be internalized which could overcome some of the issues we highlighted above.

Unemployment and Reemployment

Agency theory assumptions not only influence how we understand employment relationships but have also influenced research, practice, and policy on unemployment. In fact, this was made quite explicit in Jensen and Meckling (1994, p. 13):

‘the higher the recompense, the more attractive it is to be poor, and [people] will respond by taking more leisure, by choosing occupations in which employment is more unstable, and by investing less in learning. [...] if we make the payoff high enough, we can attract an arbitrarily large number of people to become poor or unemployed’.

Public policies, such as those applied to unemployed individuals, have often been described as a principal-agent problem (Ferraro et al., 2005; Worsham et al., 1997), where governments (principals) set policies that are then applied by administrators (agents). In many systems dictated by national unemployment policies, such as in Australia, control mechanisms abound; assistance payments can be cancelled if job seekers do not apply for a certain number of jobs, attend appointments with employment services or undertake training. Job seekers can be monitored to the point of asking employers to report them if they suspect jobseekers are not genuine in their job applications (<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/article/dobseeker-reporting-hotline-described-as-punitive/el82tlpn9>). Such programmes assume that if we do not monitor and sanction job seekers, they will not try to find a job, that their default is not to work (Sykes, 2023). Though this may apply to a few people, the majority of job seekers report these practices to be demeaning, stressful, and unhelpful in the face of strong personal motivation to re-enter employment (Price et al., 2002). For

example, these obligations do not consider difficulties they may have in attending training and interviews due to transport or childcare, having to accept jobs that do not suit them (e.g., physical requirements, distance, schedule requirements), with consequences including low retention in poorly fitting jobs and at the extreme leading to homelessness (Sykes, 2023).

Beginning with the assumption that people want to work would lead to a very different system that would support people's efforts in finding jobs by offering relevant skill building and removing barriers (e.g., childcare, transport) to job search, rather than sanctioning them. This assumption would be very much aligned to SDT, which would suggest that individuals seek out activities that can satisfy their basic psychological needs, which is very consistently the case with work activities (e.g., autonomy by finding solutions to daily tasks, competence by feeling a sense of accomplishment, and relatedness by connecting work colleagues). Such an approach likely leads to increased job search efforts, longer-term job placements, and improved mental health (Sykes, 2023). Promoting the internalization of the value of work through adequate support might go a long way to dealing with any difficulty associated with unemployment, and superior to sanctions, as has been empirically demonstrated. For example, providing job seekers with greater autonomy during reemployment guidance was positively related to motivation to find a job, higher quality job seeking behaviour, and they were more likely to find a job (Koen et al., 2016). Providing autonomy during reemployment activities is therefore a virtuous cycle such that individuals out of employment are more motivated to find work if they feel they receive autonomy-support in their efforts to do so. On the other hand, research examining programs that use sanctions and monitoring, compared to the use of supportive programs (i.e., boosting self-efficacy, encouraging proactivity, promoting goal setting, and enlisting social support; Liu et al., 2014), lead to poorer outcomes for job seekers, including less permanent employment, and lower earnings (Verlaet et al., 2021; Welters et al., 2014), both of which negatively affect the perceived value of work and wellbeing (Fidelis and Mendonca, 2020; Sykes, 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

WHY SHOULD WE RETHINK ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MOTIVATION?

We are not saying, like others have (Clarke, 2013; Ghosal, 2005; Heath, 2009; Pfeffer, 2005), that agency theory provides a completely flawed account of human motivation: people can be motivated by rewards and punishments (external regulation). However, SDT moves far beyond this and suggests, with a strong 50-year body of evidence (Ryan, 2023; Ryan and Deci, 2017; Ryan et al., 2022), that people can be motivated by many other things, including ego-involvement, meaning or values, and intrinsic interests. When we focus only on methods that promote external regulation, we can negatively impact the other types of motivation, which have been shown to lead to better outcomes than external regulation (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Because SDT has been shown to better *explain* human motivation than agency theory (Ferraro et al., 2005), it would be better, for ethical, societal and socioeconomical reasons, to use SDT to guide the crafting of practices that will foster optimal motivation in the workplace.

Ethical Impetus

We focus on two outcomes which provide an ethical impetus for reconsidering the motivational assumptions which underpin practice (although there are surely more) and in motivational terms, the first is a stick and the second a carrot! First, is the need to reduce unethical behaviour in organizations, which is important for individuals' safety, organizations' survival, and societal cohesion. We have discussed multiple examples of how an agency-based perspective on motivation implies that individuals' behaviour needs to be controlled which can create unintended consequences. Starting from the assumptions of SDT means creating a work environment that creates a shared connection to higher level goals, and on prosocial rather than self-interested needs (Grant, 2008; Hewett, 2023). Together this drives individuals to consider the outcomes of their actions for multiple stakeholders and means that individuals are more likely to speak up about moral issues (Zhao et al., 2023). This overcomes the many criticisms which we have discussed about extrinsic drivers for unethical behaviour. Second, the ethical impetus for reconsidering motivational assumptions links to the question of what work organizations are for. The principles of SDT require organizations to focus on creating more 'meaningful' jobs (where individuals feel that their work is significant and personally important; Martela et al., 2021). Meaningfulness is influenced by multi-level factors at societal, organizational, leader, team, and individual level (Lysova et al., 2019) which together represent factors that enable individuals to satisfy their basic psychological needs at work (Martela et al., 2021). Meaningful work, on the one hand, should be a basic requirement of organizations (as articulated both in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and in the International Labor Organization's principles) and yet can cost time and effort. If this is then insufficient justification, we can also draw on evidence that characteristics of meaningful work, such as participation in decision-making predict superior organizational performance (e.g., Young-Hyman et al., 2023).

Societal Impetus

The ongoing climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and geopolitical conflicts provide an alarm call for organizations to consider their place in the world, whether that be for more fundamental societal, ethical or more rational economic reasons. Battilana et al. (2022) argue that, to meet the challenges facing society we need to fundamentally change the way we organize work and yet these is also evidence that business organizations are generally becoming more short-term focused (Sampson and Shi, 2023). Battilana et al. specifically call for greater democratization of work; giving workers more involvement in decisions which impact their work and their organizations.

While there are many structural ways to achieve this goal (e.g., more collaborative organizational design; employee ownership; Young-Hyman et al., 2023) a fundamental factor is the assumptions of organizational leaders about their employees' motivation for work. Leaders who assume that employees are self-interested, rational beings who require high levels of management control in order to align them to business goals are unlikely to provide them with the autonomy they need to engage with

organizational decision-making (which extends beyond organizational boundaries; Budd et al., 2018) or the engagement in creative processes needed to support organizational efforts to respond to grand challenges (Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Evidence suggests, for example, that internalized motivation (but not intrinsic motivation) predicts individuals' engagement in political processes (Losier and Koestner, 1999) and individuals who have internalized their motivational goals are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviour (Baxter and Pelletier, 2020), and as we have seen this requires practices and behaviours which supports individuals' needs. Only by repositioning the motivational assumptions that underpin management research, science communication, practitioner partnership and education can we create the change in leader behaviours, organizational practices, and individual attitudes which allow these grand challenges to be broached.

Socio-Economic Impetus

While we have touched on the drivers for change that arise from societal pressures, it is important to give particular attention to the socio-economic drivers which are emerging from the changing nature of work and employment. In recent decades advances in digital technology have created new pressures for the quality of work, particularly in the context of gig work, made possible by more sophisticated algorithm-based platforms, and the rapid rise in widely available Artificial Intelligence (AI), which could displace (is displacing) many workers in already precarious employment as simple tasks are automated. In these contexts – where workers are seen as ‘low value, low uniqueness’ in human capital terms (Lepak and Snell, 1999), and where the workforce is often highly dispersed – high levels of coercion-based management controls (e.g., algorithmic monitoring and surveillance, coercive security measures, anti-union tactics; Kantor et al., 2021; Kellogg et al., 2020) are more prevalent.^[3] Nevertheless, the assumptions which underpin agency theory dominate, and without challenging these there is even greater risk that the quality of work will go down (or the number of low-quality jobs will go up), and organizations will make decisions based on purely rational rather than ethical or social criteria.

The most compelling arguments for rethinking motivational assumptions in this context should be based on the need to consider not only economic considerations (lower cost = higher profit [which may be a flawed assumption; Wiengarten et al., 2021]) but also longer-term societal implications of precarious work (Wilson and Ebert, 2013). However, there is also some evidence which would support more instrumental reasons to rethink motivational assumptions in this context. For example, Rockmann and Ballinger (2017) found that ‘on demand workers’ (who work on short-term projects, only when needed and have no ongoing employment relationship; much like gig workers) identified more with the organization when they were intrinsically motivated or when their needs were satisfied. In the context of AI and job displacement, evidence suggests that individuals tend to respond with less autonomous motivation when AI is used to replace humans in managerial decisions (Granulo et al., 2023) but respond more positively to AI when their basic psychological needs are satisfied (Bergdahl et al., 2023). It is also likely that AI tools will continue to adapt in ways which mean

that they are better able to satisfy individuals' basic psychological needs (perhaps even better than fellow humans at work can; Quaquebeke and Gerpott, 2023). This clearly demonstrates that individuals are not simply acting as rational actors in this context and would together indicate that organizations could support human-AI interaction, and therefore better take advantage of these advances, if they create an environment which supports individuals' motivation.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on self-determination theory, we argue that agency costs are avoidable, contrary to the assumptions which continue to influence business education and practice. People can and do internalize goals, given the proper need supportive environment. This implies avoiding the control mechanisms advocated by agency theory or redesigning them in more need supportive ways. Thus, contrary to dominant management thinking, agents/employees are not invariably and consistently only motivated extrinsically or intrinsically (Barney, 1990; Donaldson, 1990). Rather, they can move fluidly from one to the other (Hewett, 2023), or can even have both at the same time, depending on their work environment (Howard et al., 2016); motivation is malleable, and is shaped by the individual, and by their social and physical environment (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

SDT also strongly argues for a form of human welfare that comes from the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. In this paper, we have argued that agency theory's assumptions around how it views motivation, welfare, and relationships are at odds with the potential satisfaction of psychological needs and therefore are unlikely to enhance human welfare (Kasser et al., 2007). Another way to portray differences between the two theories is to consider agency theory as an egoist type of employment relationship (Budd and Bhawe, 2008), where both employer and employee pursue their own financial self-interests and labour is considered a commodity that is transacted between them. In contrast, SDT can be considered a unitarist employment relationship where human resources practices can align the interests of both parties (as well as other stakeholders), and where employees may seek greater fulfilment from work besides survival.

With this essay, we aimed to challenge conventional thinking about motivation and to ask researchers, educators, and managers to reflect on their underlying assumptions about what motivates workplace behaviour. We finish with a question: why would you NOT want to design work, organizations, and institutions that create opportunities for more autonomous motivation? The evidence is incontrovertible – nurturing autonomous motivation not only supports individual wellbeing but organizational wellbeing, too, and overcomes many of the challenges which agency theory has been unable to answer. If you are still not convinced, reflect on your own motivation for your work: do you yourself really need to be told what to do, how to do it, and incentivized (or sanctioned) to hammer that message home? Why does collective management wisdom still insist that workers need to be controlled in this way? We hope in this essay we have inspired readers to rethink this assumption.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP220102946. The authors have no conflicts of interest. Open access publishing facilitated by Curtin University, as part of the Wiley - Curtin University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

NOTES

- [1] See additional origins of agency theory in Mitnick (2021).
- [2] There have been many ways to categorize control mechanisms and an alternative view is provided by Malmi and Brown (2008).
- [3] This is also an important point at which to come back to our earlier discussion about different types of autonomy; while research on these newer forms of work highlight worker autonomy as a potential benefit (e.g., Tan et al., 2021), this autonomy is more in the form of freedom (e.g., choosing whether or not to work) than self-determination (e.g., having a say over how work is done), which theoretically have different implications for wellbeing and would therefore warrant further research in this context.

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