

ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

9. SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

9.1. Theory Background

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a macro theory of human motivation and personality, concerning people's inherent growth tendencies and their innate psychological needs. It is concerned with the motivation behind the choices that people make without any external influence and interference. SDT focuses on the degree to which an individual's behavior is self-motivated and self-determined.

In the 1970s, research on SDT evolved from studies comparing the intrinsic and extrinsic motives, and from growing understanding of the dominant role intrinsic motivation played in an individual's behavior but it was not until mid-1980s that SDT was formally introduced and accepted as a sound empirical theory. Research applying SDT to different areas in social psychology has increased considerably since the 2000s.

Key studies that led to emergence of SDT included research on intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to initiating an activity for its own sake because it is interesting and satisfying in itself, as opposed to doing an activity to obtain an external goal (extrinsic motivation). Different types of motivations have been described based on the degree they have been internalized. Internalization refers to the active attempt to transform an extrinsic motive into personally endorsed values and thus assimilate behavioral regulations that were originally external.

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan later expanded on the early work differentiating between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and proposed three main intrinsic needs involved in self-determination. According to Deci and Ryan, the three psychological needs motivate the self to initiate behavior and specify nutrients that are essential for psychological health and well-being of an individual. These needs are said to be universal, innate and psychological and include the need for competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness.

People are centrally concerned with motivation, how to move themselves or others to act. Everywhere, parents, teachers, coaches, and managers struggle with how to motivate those that they mentor, and individuals struggle to find energy, mobilize effort and persist at the tasks of life and work. People are often moved by external factors such as reward systems, grades, evaluations, or the opinions they fear others might have of them. Yet just as frequently, people are motivated from within, by interests, curiosity, care or abiding values. These intrinsic motivations are not necessarily externally rewarded or supported, but nonetheless they can sustain passions, creativity, and sustained efforts. The interplay between the extrinsic forces acting on persons and the intrinsic motives and needs inherent in human nature is the territory of Self-Determination Theory.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. SDT articulates a meta-theory for framing motivational studies, a formal theory that defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and in individual differences. Perhaps more importantly SDT propositions also focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance. Conditions supporting the individual's experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are argued to foster the most volitional and high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity. In addition SDT proposes that the degree to which any of these three psychological needs is unsupported or thwarted within a social context will have a robust detrimental impact on wellness in that setting.

The dynamics of psychological need support and need thwarting have been studied within families, classrooms, teams, organizations, clinics, and cultures using specific propositions detailed within SDT. The SDT framework thus has both broad and behavior-specific implications for understanding practices and structures that enhance versus diminish need satisfaction and the full functioning that follows from it. These many implications are best revealed by the varied papers listed on this website, which range from basic research on motivational micro-processes to applied clinical trials aiming at population outcomes.

9.2. Meta-Theory: The Organismic Viewpoint

SDT is an organismic dialectical approach. It begins with the assumption that people are active organisms, with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. These natural developmental tendencies do not, however, operate automatically, but instead require ongoing social nutrients and supports. That is, the social context can either support or thwart the natural tendencies toward active engagement and psychological growth, or it can catalyze lack of integration, defense, and fulfillment of need-substitutes. Thus, it is the dialectic between the active organism and the social context that is the basis for SDT's predictions about behavior, experience, and development. Within SDT, the nutrients for healthy development and functioning are specified using the concept of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To the extent that the needs are ongoingly satisfied people will develop and function effectively and experience wellness, but to the extent that they are thwarted, people more likely evidence ill-being and non-optimal functioning. The darker sides of human behavior and experience, such as certain types of psychopathology, prejudice, and aggression are understood in terms of reactions to basic needs having been thwarted, either developmentally or proximally.

9.3. Formal Theory: SDT's Five Mini-Theories

Formally SDT comprises five mini-theories, each of which was developed to explain a set of motivationally based phenomena that emerged from laboratory and field research. Each, therefore, addresses one facet of motivation or personality functioning.

- 1. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)* concerns intrinsic motivation, motivation that is based on the satisfactions of behaving “for its own sake.” Prototypes of intrinsic motivation are children’s exploration and play, but intrinsic motivation is a lifelong creative wellspring. CET specifically addresses the effects of social contexts on intrinsic motivation, or how factors such as rewards, interpersonal controls, and ego-involvements impact intrinsic motivation and interest. CET highlights the critical roles played by competence and autonomy supports in fostering intrinsic motivation, which is critical in education, arts, sport, and many other domains.

2. ***Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)***, addresses the topic of extrinsic motivation in its various forms, with their properties, determinants, and consequences. Broadly speaking extrinsic motivation is behavior that is instrumental—that aims toward outcomes extrinsic to the behavior itself. Yet there are distinct forms of instrumentality, which include external regulation, introjection, identification, and integration. These subtypes of extrinsic motivation are seen as falling along a continuum of internalization. The more internalized the extrinsic motivation the more autonomous the person will be when enacting the behaviors. OIT is further concerned with social contexts that enhance or forestall internalization that is, with what conduces toward people either resisting, partially adopting, or deeply internalizing values, goals, or belief systems. OIT particularly highlights supports for autonomy and relatedness as critical to internalization.
3. ***Causality Orientations Theory (COT)***, the third mini-theory, describes individual differences in people's tendencies to orient toward environments and regulate behavior in various ways. COT describes and assesses three types of causality orientations: the autonomy orientation in which persons act out of interest in and valuing of what is occurring; the control orientation in which the focus is on rewards, gains, and approval; and the impersonal or a motivated orientation characterized by anxiety concerning competence.
4. ***Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT)*** elaborates the concept of evolved psychological needs and their relations to psychological health and well-being. BPNT argues that psychological well-being and optimal functioning is predicated on autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, contexts that support versus thwart these needs should invariantly impact wellness. The theory argues that all three needs are essential and that if any is thwarted there will be distinct functional costs. Because basic needs are universal aspects of functioning, BPNT looks at cross-developmental and cross-cultural settings for validation and refinements.
5. ***Goal Contents Theory (GCT)***, grows out of the distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and their impact on motivation and wellness. Goals are seen as differentially affording basic need satisfactions and are thus differentially associated with well-being. Extrinsic goals such as financial success, appearance, and popularity/fame have been specifically contrasted with intrinsic goals such as community, close relationships, and personal growth, with the former more likely associated with lower wellness and greater ill-being.

9.4. Other Topics of Interest

As SDT has expanded both in terms of breadth and depth, both theoretical developments and empirical findings have led SDT researchers to examine a plethora of processes and phenomena integral to personality growth, effective functioning, and wellness. For example, SDT research has focused on the role of mindfulness as a foundation for autonomous regulation of behavior, leading to both refined measurement and theorizing about awareness. The study of facilitating conditions for intrinsic motivation led to a theory and measurement strategy regarding vitality, an indicator of both mental and physical wellness. Work on vitality also uncovered the remarkable positive impact of the experience of nature on well-being. Some research within SDT has more closely examined the forms personal passions can take, with individuals being obsessive or harmonious as a function of internalization processes. And cross-cultural tests of SDT have led to an increased understanding of how economic and cultural forms impact the invariant aspects of human nature. Research on wellness has also led to new theory and research on the assessment of well-being itself, including the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic forms of living. Specific topics such as autonomy versus controlled motivation has led to greater understanding of internalized control such as ego-involvement and contingent self-esteem and of the differences between them and autonomous self-regulation. Indeed these few examples supply just a taste of how the generative framework of SDT has enhanced research on a variety of processes of interest to the field.

9.5. Applications

In addition to formal theory development, research has applied SDT in many domains including education, organizations, sport and physical activity, religion, health and medicine, parenting, virtual environments and media, close relationships, and psychotherapy. Across these domains research has looked at how controlling versus autonomy-supportive environments impact functioning and wellness, as well as performance and persistence. In addition, supports for relatedness and competence are seen as interactive with volitional supports in fostering engagement and value within specific settings, and within domains of activity. This body of applied research has led to considerable specification of techniques, including goal structures and ways of communicating that have proven effective at promoting maintained, volitional motivation.

By focusing on the fundamental psychological tendencies toward intrinsic motivation and integration, SDT occupies a unique position in psychology, as it addresses not only the central questions of why people do what they do, but also the costs and benefits of various ways of socially regulating or promoting behavior.