

## **TOPIC- Self-determination Theory (SDT)**

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### **OVERVIEW -**

Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation that examines a wide range of phenomena across gender, culture, age, and socioeconomic status. As a motivational theory, it addresses what energizes people's behavior and moves them into action, as well as how their behavior is regulated in the various domains of their lives. SDT's explanations are focused at the psychological level (rather than the sociological or physiological levels), thus using human perceptions, cognitions, emotions, and needs as predictors of regulatory, behavioral, developmental, and experiential outcomes (e.g., Ryan and Deci, 2000b).

Central to the theory is the important distinction between two types of motivation – autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Traditionally, motivation theories have treated motivation as a unitary concept focusing just on the total amount of motivation people have for behaviors in order to predict how vigorously they will engage in those behaviors, and many contemporary theories of motivation still do. SDT, in contrast, has always put its primary emphasis on the types of motivation people have for various behaviors.

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.

Self-determination theory was developed over the last 50 years by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000a). 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 behaviour, but it was not until the 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.

### **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 catalyse lack of integration, defence, and fulfilment 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 behaviour, experience, and development.

## **Formal Theory: SDT's Six Mini-Theories**

Formally, **SDT comprises six 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. Basic Needs Theory**

Basic Needs Theory (BNT) addresses the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the psychological needs for a sense of well-being. The fulfilment of basic human needs described in the SDT is a resource of personal growth and psychological well-being. **The concept of basic psychological needs is central to SDT because it specifies the nutrients that are essential in the environment to support and facilitate people becoming more autonomously motivated, experiencing greater psychological and physiological wellness, and performing more effectively** (Gagné and Deci, 2005; Ryan et al., 2008b).

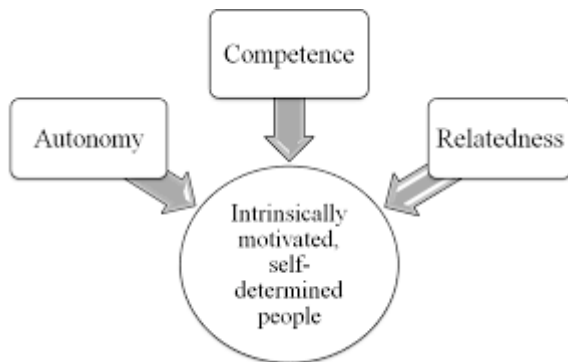
Following are the psychological needs as stated by SDT -

- **Autonomy** is the need to feel that one's behavior emanates from one's own self-endorsed values, goals, needs, and interests, rather than from external regulators with which one cannot identify. It is having the perception that one is the origin of one's own action, that he or she is the source of his or her own behavior.
- **Competence** is the need to feel a sense of efficacy in the environment, to master desirable challenges, and exercise one's capacities and capabilities. It is feeling effective in one's interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to demonstrate one's expertise and worth. The psychological need for competence drives people to seek after new challenges that leverage and enhance the core skills and abilities that define their sense of competence.
- **Relatedness** is the need to establish close personal bonds and relationships with others, and to thereby find emotional and caring support and security. It is a sense of connectedness with others, that one cares for others and in turn is cared for by others, and has a feeling of belonging to the larger community. It refers to the tendency that individuals have to seek personal and group connections.

The importance of supports for psychological need satisfaction has been shown concurrently and developmentally-

**First**, *some studies have shown that when the current social environment supports one or more of the basic needs, people tend to be more autonomously motivated in that situation.* Examples of this are the experiments showing that both choice and acknowledging people's feelings in a particular situation enhanced their intrinsic motivation for the target activity at that time (Deci et al., 1999). When environments supported people's autonomy, they became more intrinsically motivated. Similarly, an experiment (Deci et al., 1994) showed that supports for autonomy in a particular situation facilitated internalization and integration in that situation.

**Second**, the promotion of autonomous motivation and wellness has been shown developmentally. For example, studies have shown that when the social contexts of either homes or classrooms were autonomy supportive of young students, the students tended, over time, to develop stronger identifications with the importance of doing schoolwork – that is, they internalized this value and regulation more fully (Grolnick and Ryan, 1989).



The concept of general causality orientations concerns people's general individual differences with regard to autonomous and controlled motivation and amotivation. This concept of causality orientations is viewed as a developmental outcome – that is, it is said to result from

the mix of supporting versus thwarting of the basic psychological needs during one's developmental years. When all of the needs are satisfied over time, in homes, schools, and elsewhere, while children are growing up, they tend to develop a relatively strong autonomy orientation. When the competence and relatedness needs are supported, but the need for autonomy is thwarted, people tend to develop a fairly strong controlled orientation, and when all of the needs are relatively thwarted, people tend to develop a high level of the impersonal orientation. **In short, the satisfaction versus thwarting of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness explains the enhancement versus undermining of intrinsic motivation, the internalization of extrinsic motivation, and the development of general causality orientations.**

## **2. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)-**

**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.**

**Early intrinsic motivation research examined the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. At issue is whether giving extrinsic rewards to people who are intrinsically motivated for an activity would enhance their intrinsic motivation for the activity. The initial research indicated that in fact extrinsic rewards do undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971).** People who did an interesting activity to get a monetary reward were subsequently less intrinsically motivated than others who did the same activity without getting the reward. This was a very controversial finding because it highlighted negative effects of rewards, which is no doubt the archetype of motivation in most people's minds, and of course in the behavioral psychologies. So, in the subsequent decades there were many additional tests of this phenomenon. A meta-analysis of more than 100 experiments confirmed that tangible rewards do in fact undermine intrinsic motivation for a behavior, especially if the rewards are contingent

on the behavior, expected while doing it, and relatively salient (Deci et al., 1999). On the other hand, the research and meta-analysis also showed that positive feedback enhanced intrinsic motivation. Additional experiments showed, as summarized by Ryan and Deci (2000a), that threats of punishment, deadlines, evaluations, and surveillance all undermined intrinsic motivation, whereas providing people with choice, as well as acknowledging their feelings and perspectives, tended to enhance their intrinsic motivation.

**In drawing these findings together and providing a theoretical account, Deci and Ryan (1985) posited that integral to intrinsic motivation are two fundamental psychological needs – that is, the needs for autonomy and competence.** Stated differently, people have inherent psychological needs, just as they have basic physiological needs (e.g., oxygen, food, and water), and satisfaction versus thwarting of the basic psychological needs can have a range of positive versus negative consequences. Specifically, people may become dependent on and controlled by external events such as tangible rewards, threats, deadlines, and surveillance, thus having their need for autonomy thwarted and their intrinsic motivation undermined by these events. In contrast, choice and the acknowledgment of their internal perspective have been found to increase people's sense of autonomy, thus enhancing their intrinsic motivation. Concerning feedback, positive feedback tends to affirm people's sense of effectance, thus satisfying their need for competence and enhancing their intrinsic motivation; whereas, negative feedback, which has been found to diminish intrinsic motivation, is thought to have its effects by thwarting the need for competence.

### **3. Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)**

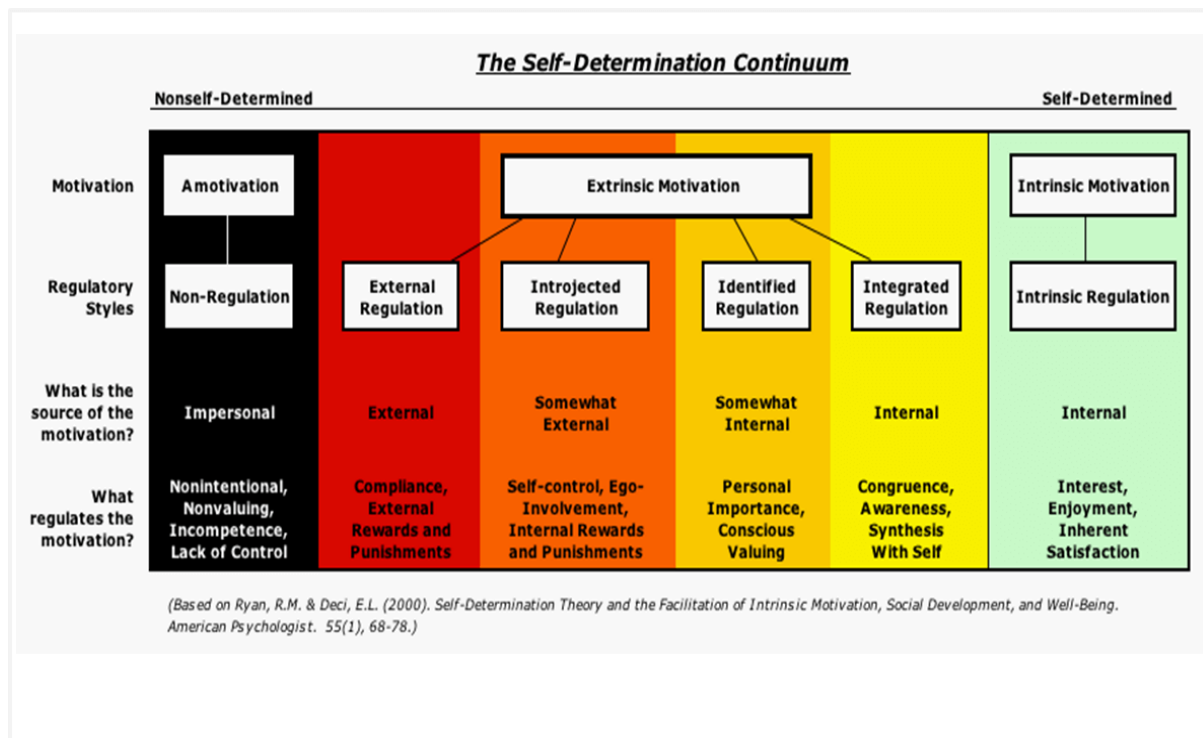
Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) postulates that people have a natural inclination to internalize their experiences. **As this relates to SDT, this suggests that as people are externally motivated and rewarded to perform an otherwise uninteresting activity, they will in time develop a certain degree of intrinsic motivation around that task. Put another way, external regulations can be internalized and become internal regulations.**

To this end, **OIT proposes a taxonomy of extrinsic regulations and a correlation to the degree to which they emanate from the self and influence on autonomy.** It begins with

**amotivation**, which lacks any intention to act, or if they do act is to passively and without any intent in the action. The **next four points in the continuum offer varying degrees of extrinsic motivation. They are as follows –**

- **External regulation** is the least autonomous of the motivations, and is rooted in the simple utilitarian proposition of gaining a reward or avoiding punishment. External regulation does not support one's sense of autonomy.
- **Introjected regulation** is an example of an external regulation that is internalized to some degree and therefore providing some level of autonomy.
- Regulation through **Identification** is the next on the continuum and involves a greater degree of autonomy. It involves a conscious valuation of the behavioral objective, an acceptance of the same as personally relevant and important.
- The last of the external motivations, **Integrated Regulation** offers the most autonomous of the external regulations. In this instance, the intent of the behavior has been brought into congruence with the goals, values, and needs of the individual.

**Finally, the continuum ends at intrinsic motivation**, the innate motivation that emerge spontaneously from an individual's psychological needs. This has important ramifications in developing compensation and recognition programs.



With the elaboration of extrinsic motivation in terms of the degree of internalization, and thus of autonomy, it became clear that the distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation was the most useful and appropriate as the primary distinction in SDT. Accordingly, autonomous motivation comprises external and introjected forms of extrinsic motivation, whereas controlled motivation comprises identified and integrated forms of extrinsic motivation, along with intrinsic motivation. In this, one sees that some types of extrinsic motivation (identified and integrated) are relatively autonomous along with intrinsic motivation and one type of internal motivation (introjected) is relatively controlled. As such, neither the intrinsic–extrinsic distinction, nor the internal– external distinction works as cleanly and effectively as the autonomous-controlled distinction.



#### **4. Causality Orientations Theory (COT)**

The concept of general causality orientations refers to three individual difference variables related to people's understanding of the causality for their behaviors and the degrees to which, motivationally, they are generally oriented in these ways.

**The three causality orientation dimensions are-**

- **the autonomous orientation,**
- **the controlled orientation,**
- **and the impersonal orientation (Deci and Ryan, 1985).**

When people are **high in the autonomous orientation**, they tend to focus on information in the environment and within themselves that they can use in making choices, and they tend to have a high level of autonomous motivation. When people are **high in the controlled orientation**, they tend to focus on controls and pressures in the environment and within themselves that tell them what they should do, and to a substantial degree their behavior is controlled. When people are **high in the impersonal orientation**, they tend to focus on cues in the environment and within themselves that signify their incompetence and inability to obtain desired outcomes, and they tend to be amotivated a good deal of the time.

Each person has each of these orientations to some degree, so people are not categorized as being one type of person or another. Rather, the three orientations are all operative to differing degrees, and each orientation influences some of their behaviors and experiences. The autonomous orientation is related to self-esteem and self-actualization; the controlled orientation is related to public self-consciousness and the type-A coronary-prone behavior pattern; and the impersonal orientation is related to self-derogation and depressive symptoms.

## **5. Goal Contents Theory (GCT)-**

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.

The concept of goals has been perhaps the most common motivational concept in the psychological literature on motivation since the 1960s, when cognitive processes have been the central explanatory approach to psychology. Goals are outcomes that people value and hope to attain when engaging in particular behaviors.

In SDT, although psychological needs is the most important explanatory concept, goals also have an important place. Specifically, SDT has focused on the degree to which people place value on what are called extrinsic life goals or aspirations, such as wealth, fame, and image, relative to intrinsic life goals such as personal growth, relationships, and community.

Research has shown that when people value the extrinsic aspirations more strongly than the intrinsic aspirations, they tend also to display poor psychological health, whereas when they value the intrinsic aspirations more strongly, they are psychologically healthier (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). These results have been consistently replicated in varied groups and cultures, and the explanation of the findings supported by SDT research is that the pursuit and attainments of the intrinsic goals of self-exploration, meaningful relationships, and community contributions tend to provide direct satisfaction of the basic psychological needs, whereas pursuit and attainment of the extrinsic goals of material possessions, social recognition, and attractive image are at best indirectly satisfying of the basic needs and may even be antagonistic to them.

Furthermore, research has shown that people tend to value the extrinsic aspirations when they have had a low level of basic psychological need satisfaction during their years as children, but they tend to value intrinsic aspirations when they have had a high level of basic satisfaction during those years (Kasser et al., 1995).

As well, studies found that if people's goals are manipulated experimentally, having intrinsic goals made salient led to better learning and performance than having extrinsic goals made salient. When, for example, business students who were learning about communications were told that it would help them learn about themselves, which is an intrinsic goal, their learning and performance was better than when the students were told that it would help them make more money, which is an extrinsic goal (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

#### 6. **Relationships Motivation Theory (RMT)-**

The concepts of SDT have also been used to examine close personal relationships such as best friends and romantic partners. Much of the SDT research has focused on the importance of autonomy in close relationships. Some theorists have argued that to have a satisfying close relationship people need to give up autonomy in service of the dyad, but **SDT has argued that autonomy, as well as relatedness and competence, must be satisfied within a relationship in order for the relationship to be high quality and truly satisfying. Studies have shown that indeed the degree to which people experience autonomy in a particular relationship predicts the degree of attachment security in that relationship. Across several relationships (e.g., mother, father, best friend, romantic partner) people experience considerable variability in the degree to which their need for autonomy is satisfied with different partners, and similarly they experience different degrees of attachment security. For each of the partners, autonomy need satisfaction directly predicted security of attachment in the relationship (La Guardia et al., 2000).**

A different study examined best friend relationships and found that mutuality of providing autonomy support was important for satisfying friendships. In other words, when a person received autonomy support from a friend it contributed to the person's attachment security, emotional reliance, relationship satisfaction, and well-being, a set of findings that was true for each partner. Further, however, when a person gave autonomy support to the friend, not only did the friend benefit, but the person actually benefitted from the giving to the partner. **So, both receiving autonomy support and giving autonomy support within a friendship benefits each partner in that relationship (Deci et al., 2006).**

**Application of SDT-**

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. Overviews of the theory can be found in Ryan and Deci (2000) and in Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), as well as numerous other articles and chapters identified here on our website.