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Basic Psychological Needs Across Cultures: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Basic Psychological Needs Across Cultures: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Self-determination theory is an empirically based approach to the study of factors that facilitate psychological growth, integrity and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory specifies that there are three basic psychological needs that are universal and cross-developmental, namely those for competence and relatedness and autonomy. *Competence* refers to the need to feel effective and to have control with respect to ones environment, and it is facilitated by both optimal challenges and effectance supportive feedback. *Relatedness* refers to meaningful connections with intimate others and social groups, and is facilitated by warmth, caring and sense of significance. Finally, *autonomy* refers to the need to experience volition, and to self-endorse one's own actions. The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, or excessive external control. Autonomy is distinguished within SDT from independence or individualism, in that a person can, for example, be autonomously or heteronomously dependent, or autonomously or heteronomously collectivistic. Three decades of work within SDT have established an enormous body of empirical findings supporting the importance of these needs, derived from both experimental and applied field studies.

Initial SDT work was on *intrinsic motivation* (IM), which underlies much psychological growth and assimilation, showing that supports for autonomy and competence were particularly critical for sustaining IM, whereas controlling environments undermined IM (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Factors such as contingent rewards, pressures and controlling evaluations have all been shown to undermine IM, whereas supports for autonomy and optimal challenges facilitate it. This model has been sustained in cultures as diverse as Korea, Japan, Russia, South Africa and the U.S. SDT work on intrinsic motivation has been applied in domains such as education, second language acquisition, physical activity and play.

Although intrinsic motivation is an important developmental resource for learning and growth, equally important is the process of *internalization*, whereby persons assimilate and integrate important cultural norms, values and regulations that are not intrinsically motivated. SDT specifies, and finds empirical support, for the hypothesis that behavioral regulations vary in their relative autonomy along a continuum of internalization, from being *externally controlled* (person obeys a rule out of fear, or for tangible reward) to *introjected* (person follows a norm to

avoid guilt, or feel pride), to *identification* (person consciously grasps activity's value), to *integration* (value is well assimilated with other values). Evidence shows that more autonomous internalizations are associated with greater persistence, stability, vitality, cultural fit and positive experience. Moreover, supports for relatedness, competence and autonomy all play crucial roles in facilitating greater internalization and integration. This is so across cultures, as recent work by Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan (2003) reviews and illustrates.

Finally according to SDT, fulfillment of needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness directly predict well-being across diverse cultures. Most controversial has been the issue of *autonomy*, but the controversy largely stems from confusion between autonomy (as volition and congruence in behavior) versus *individualism* (which has to do with separateness and distinction of self). SDT views autonomy as a universal need, whereas individualism and independence are seen as culturally specific values. The need theory has been supported by evidence in cultural groups from Pakistan, Bulgaria, Palestine, Brazil, Russia, Israel, Korea and China, as well as numerous Western countries, showing strong relations of need supports to health and well being. Moreover, SDT-based studies of need fulfillment at within-person levels demonstrate how variations in need supports over time or across relationships predict variations in well being (e.g., Reis et al., 2000; Lynch et al., 2004). Finally, SDT has shown how extrinsic life goals, such as materialism, do not directly fulfill basic needs, and can distract from them, and thus have deleterious impact on well being, even when attained (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996, Ryan et al, 1999). By contrast, intrinsic goals for community, intimacy and growth predict greater wellness.

This very large and growing body of research was recently celebrated at the SDT 2nd International Conference in Ottawa CA, (www.selfdeterminationtheory.org) where researchers from 14 nations converged to present relevant findings on topics such as health care, religious internalization, education, materialism, multicultural assimilation and whether some cultural forms are more conducive to health than others. Studies converged on the view that, in addition to common physical needs, persons across the globe share a small set of basic psychological needs that, despite cultural variations in values and practices, must be supported for well being to ensue. This work has also recently contributed to the increasingly important distinction between mere hedonic happiness and eudaimonic wellness, the latter representing the flourishing of human potentials (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan & Frederick, 1995). In the SDT formulation, basic need satisfaction underlies eudaimonia, as well as collective well-being.

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