

## Self-determination Theory and Wellbeing

By Prof. Richard Ryan\*

**Self-determination theory (SDT) is a macro-theory of human motivation, personality development, and well-being. The theory focuses especially on volitional or self-determined behaviour and the social and cultural conditions that promote it. SDT also postulates a set of basic and universal psychological needs, namely those for autonomy, competence and relatedness, the fulfilment of which is considered necessary and essential to vital, healthy human functioning regardless of culture or stage of development.**

Ryan and Deci (2001) maintain that wellbeing is not best captured by hedonic conceptions of 'happiness' alone. Instead, SDT also employs the concept of eudaimonia, or wellbeing defined as vital, full functioning, as a complementary approach. Finally, because autonomy is facilitated by reflective awareness, SDT stresses the role of mindfulness in self-regulation and wellness.

Self-determination theory is an 'organismic psychology' (Ryan, 1995), one of a family of holistic psychological theories including Jean Piaget and Carl Rogers, and thus assumes that people are active organisms with inherent and deeply evolved tendencies toward psychological growth and development. This active human nature is clearly evident in the phenomenon of intrinsic motivation – the natural tendency manifest from birth to seek out challenges, novelty and opportunities to learn. It is also evident in the phenomenon of internalization, or the lifespan propensity of individuals to take on and attempt to integrate the social practices and values that surround them.

Although the growth tendencies underlying intrinsic motivation and internalization are evolved and therefore 'natural', this does not imply that they operate robustly under all conditions. Instead these inherent tendencies require specific supports and nutriments from one's social environment. These nutriments are conceptualized within SDT as basic psychological needs, which are defined as those supports and satisfactions that are essential and necessary for psychological growth, integrity, and wellness. Within SDT there are three basic

psychological needs, namely those for autonomy, relatedness and competence. When these three needs are supported and satisfied within a social context people experience more vitality, self-motivation, and well-being. Conversely, the thwarting or frustration of these basic needs leads to diminished self-motivation and greater ill-being; in fact, need thwarting is entailed in the aetiology of many forms of psychopathology (see Ryan et al. 2006).

SDT has been developed and researched through a set of five mini-theories, which together comprise the theory's formal framework. Each mini-theory was initially introduced to explain phenomena that emerged from experimental and/or field research on factors affecting human motivation and optimal functioning. We briefly list and define each of these in order of their introduction into SDT.

*Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)* concerns how social contexts and interpersonal interaction either facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing something for its own sake, and applies to activities such as play, sport, and leisure. CET stresses the importance of autonomy and competence to intrinsic motion, and argues that events that are perceived to detract from these will diminish intrinsic motivation. CET specifically addresses how factors such as rewards, deadlines, feedback and pressure affect feelings of autonomy and competence and thus enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation. For instance CET explains why some reward structures, for example, financial incentives, actually detract from subsequent motivation, a phenomenon that is often called 'the undermining effect of rewards' (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999).

*Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)* addresses the process of internalization of various extrinsic motives. Here the focus is on the continuum of internalization, extending from external regulation, to introjection (for example, engaging in behaviors to avoid guilt or feel approval), to identification, to integration. These forms of regulation, which can be simultaneously operative, differ in their relative autonomy, with external regulation being the least autonomous form

of extrinsic motivation and integrated regulation the most autonomous. SDT research shows that the more autonomous the person's motivation, the greater their persistence, performance, and well-being at an activity or within a domain. OIT further suggests that internalization and integration is facilitated by contextual supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. That is, individuals are more likely to internalize and integrate a practice or value if they experience choice with respect to it, efficacy in engaging in it, and connection with those who convey it. Considerable research across the globe shows that greater internalization of cultural practices is associated with greater wellness and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Causality Orientations Theory* (COT) describes individual differences in how people orient to different aspects of the environment in regulating behaviour. When autonomy-oriented, a person orients to what interests them and acts with congruence. When control-oriented, a person primarily regulates behaviour by orienting to social controls and reward contingencies, and when impersonally oriented a person focuses on their lack of personal control or competence. COT is also used to explain how primes or prior stimuli activate certain orientations in people, affecting subsequent motivation.

Fourth, *Basic Psychological Needs Theory* (BPNT) elaborates on the concept of basic needs by connecting them directly with wellness. BPNT posits that each need exerts independent effects on wellness, and moreover that the impact of any behaviour or event on well-being is largely a function of its relations with need satisfaction. Research on BPNT shows that aggregate need satisfaction predicts individual differences in health and wellness, as well as within person fluctuations in wellness across time.

Finally, a fifth mini-theory was recently introduced called *Goal Contents Theory* (GCT). Research has shown that materialism and other extrinsic goals such

as fame or image do not tend to enhance need satisfaction, and thus do not foster well-being, even when one is successful at attaining them (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Niemiec et al. 2009). In contrast, goals such as intimate relationships, personal growth, or contributing to one's community are conducive to need satisfaction, and therefore facilitate health and wellness. GCT has also been applied to how goals are framed. Evidence suggests that goals framed toward intrinsic aims are better adhered to than those focused on extrinsic outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Together these five mini-theories constitute SDT and provide specific propositions in multiple domains open to test and refinement. Given its broad scope, SDT has spawned research, and controversy, in numerous areas. One issue has been the impact of rewards, which SDT argues can powerfully exert control over behaviour, but often at the cost of subsequent intrinsic motivation or internalization. Another controversy is the cross-cultural generalisability of SDT. SDT suggests that whether collectivist or individualist, male or female, people function most effectively and experience greater mental health when their behaviour is autonomous rather than controlled. This cross-cultural hypothesis has been actively tested (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim & Kaplan, 2003).

In addition to its theoretical contribution SDT has myriad practical implications for domains such as education, health-care, work, parenting, religion, sustainability, psychotherapy, and sport/exercise contexts. It has generated considerable applied research and numerous interventions, including controlled clinical trials in various areas. Recent overviews of theory and research can be found in Ryan et al. (2006) and Deci and Ryan (2000), and papers from a range of scholars using SDT can be found at [www.selfdeterminationtheory.org](http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org)

---

### Further Readings

- Brown, K. W. & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 822-848.
- Chirkov, V. I., Ryan, R. M., Kim, Y., & Kaplan, U. (2003). Differentiating autonomy from individualism and independence: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization of cultural orientations and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 97-110.
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 627-668.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behaviour. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 227-268.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour*. New York: Plenum.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 280-287.
- Niemiec, C. P., Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2009). The path taken: Consequences of attaining intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations in post-college life. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43, 291-306.
- Ryan, R. M. (1995). Psychological needs and the facilitation of integrative processes. *Journal of Personality*, 63, 397-427.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). To be happy or to be self-fulfilled: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. In S. Fiske (Ed.), *Annual Review of Psychology* (Vol. 52; 141-166). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews/ Inc.
- Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Grolnick, W. S., & LaGuardia, J. G. (2006). The significance of autonomy and autonomy support in psychological development and psychopathology. In D. Cicchetti & D. Cohen (Eds.) *Developmental Psychopathology: Volume 1, Theory and Methods* (2nd Edition, pp. 295-849). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal-contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 41, 19-31.