

Chapter 3

A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Social, Institutional, Cultural, and Economic Supports for Autonomy and Their Importance for Well-Being

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Around the globe today people struggle both for freedom and for the good life. They fight for freedom from oppressive external controls, and they struggle to be able to express and autonomously pursue their abiding cultural, spiritual, and personal values. Everywhere, too, people also seek the good life. They work to realize culturally sculpted aspirations and life goals that can to a greater or lesser extent fulfill their promise for fostering happiness and well-being.

In this chapter we apply a *self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, b) framework to explore two main questions. First, why, and to what extent, is the promotion of autonomy necessary for the attainment of well-being? Second, concerning visions of the good life, why are some lifestyles and aspirations more wellness producing than others? In the first of these questions we explore the importance of volition in the behaviors people undertake. In the second, we consider not the “why,” but the “what,” of people’s behavior. In doing so, we explore the contents of the goals or aspirations to which people allocate behavioral resources, and relative yield of these goals in terms of happiness and well-being.

To anticipate our conclusions, people’s autonomous functioning and their attainment of wellness are indeed deeply connected. *Autonomous self-regulation* is central in allowing the individual to choose and most fully develop preferred ways of being, and in doing so to satisfy basic psychological needs which in turn lead to vitality and happiness. That is, when autonomous, people typically optimize the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs, often through behaviors that have larger social benefits. Thus, SDT suggests a link between autonomy and need fulfillment, the feelings of wellness that derive from need fulfillment, and the productivity and cultural enrichments autonomy-supportive environments so frequently yield.

Although autonomy is functionally important to wellness, the life goals and lifestyles people pursue also differ in their capacity to produce happiness and well-being. Our findings show that pursuit of some culturally constructed visions of the “good life” yields, in a relatively direct way, the fundamental psychological need

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satisfactions that SDT hypothesizes underlie wellness. In contrast other life goals distract from, or even thwart basic need satisfactions, and therefore fail to support well-being. The evidence we review, in fact, gives strong credence to some well-known “secrets of happiness” based on goals for intimate relationships, contributing to community, and pursuing personal growth, and it dispels some popular myths that the road to happiness entails garnering wealth, image, or fame.

Finally, when we look at social contextual effects we find that controlling environments, whether they are familial, institutional, cultural, economic, or political, interfere with wellness and happiness by undermining autonomous functioning. In contrast, support for autonomy is associated with individual thriving, and national quality of life.

Happiness and Well-Being Debated

Well-being and happiness: what defines them and what brings them about are perennially debated topics, ones that have engaged many of the world’s great minds. Without unveiling a ready list of quotes to prove it, many of our most revered figures, both secular and non-secular, have grappled with the happiness issue, and seem to agree on some essentials. For many—and here we include Jesus, Confucius, Buddha, and Aristotle, among others—happiness is not fostered by selfishness or over-consumption; it is instead fostered by reflective, purposive living in accord with deeply held social values. In terms of contents it is typically said to lie in such things as personal growth, loving relationships, and giving to one’s community rather than the pursuit of vanity and image, riches and power, and other such worldly ideals. Such are the well-known secrets of happiness according to those deemed our most wise.

Despite the weightiness of these figures, there are clearly other opinions. According to many contemporary cultural icons, from the USA’s Donald Trump to today’s global Hip-Hop stars, the key to happiness is the *psychology of more*: more money, more fame, more attractiveness. This image of the good life is continuously reinforced by the media and advertising industry. They deliver this sermon: Without having more and more one cannot be successful or happy. Furthermore, the values corresponding to this message—namely, that money, image, and fame are among the most important aims in life—are being widely internalized and practiced. For example, a 2007 Pew research poll found that eight of ten US “gen-nexters” (young adults) reported that being wealthy is the top or second most important life goal in their peer group. More of these young adults would rather be a celebrity’s assistant than a federal judge or a Harvard professor. In short, many in this generation (and in their parents’ before them) have accepted this idea of the good life. Around the globe the message is similarly sinking in: consumerism is the new way forward.

Whatever one thinks about these opposing views of happiness or their implications for the future, both sides of the debate represent *opinions*. That is, Aristotle may have reasoned correctly that those who live a *eudaimonic life* (i.e., his good life

of moderation, self-actualization, and reflective action) have the highest well-being and are also the most likely to experience happiness. Yet, it might also be the case that the “Donald Trump message” of finding the good life through wealth, consumption, and image is more on target in today’s increasingly capitalistic, competitive, and materialistic world. For us, however, which of these views fulfills its promise is an empirical question, not a matter of opinion.

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000b) is a research-based theory of motivation and personality development that has also focused on happiness and well-being. As an empirical approach, SDT is interested in getting evidence-based answers to questions about what makes people not only motivated, but also what makes them thrive or flourish. It offers testable hypotheses about what produces and sustains people’s fullest, healthiest functioning and psychological wellness. In our research we look at wellness with an array of outcomes, including subjective well-being, or happiness, as well as freedom from stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, and experiencing vitality and integration in functioning. But more importantly, the SDT framework allows one to go beyond the compiling of outcomes, to an understanding of why and how social and cultural conditions support or thwart happiness and wellness. In this chapter we examine the theory and its assumptions, and we review some representative empirical findings supporting its approach to wellness.

Happiness and Wellness Defined

Defining well-being and happiness seems clear enough—doesn’t everyone know what it is? Yet the study of happiness and well-being is anything but straightforward. In fact, something of a row got started when Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz (1999) introduced their “science of well-being” by defining wellness in strictly hedonic terms. Somehow the stark and bold definition of well-being as merely the *presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect* rekindled the need of many scholars to articulate a fuller conception of wellness, not just as happy feelings, but also as a fully functioning human being (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). Many of these rekindled conceptions draw heavily from Aristotle’s eudaimonic perspective in which happiness is defined not in terms of feeling states, but in terms of a way of living in which one’s human capacities are fully employed and realized (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008).

SDT has been vigorously involved in this discussion, (see, e.g., Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008; Ryan & Huta, 2009). In contradistinction to purely hedonic approaches, SDT distinguishes happiness, which is a subjective experience of positive versus negative mood, from wellness, which concerns *full and vital functioning*. In the SDT view one can identify many means to happiness, only some of which would be considered healthy or indicative of wellness (Huta & Ryan, in press). Conversely within SDT the capacity to be unhappy, for example to be sad or

distressed after a loss, and to allow authentic feelings to be in awareness, can often be more indicative of wellness than an incongruent demeanor of happiness. SDT thus specifically embraces the idea that wellness is not equivalent to happiness, positive affect, or an absence of negative affect. Wellness instead is open, engaged, and healthy functioning. This full functioning conduces to happiness but does not guarantee it (Ryan & Deci, 2001), whereas happiness may be evident when people either are or are not living well.

Basic Needs Underlying Wellness

Just as there are specific needs underlying physical health, psychological wellness also requires specific supports and nutriments. A focus of SDT is thus on facilitating satisfaction of the *basic psychological needs* that lead to vitality and wellness, where needs are defined as the necessary nutriments for thriving. According to SDT there are three broad categories of such nutriments: supports for autonomy, for competence, and for relatedness. Specifically, SDT suggests that people are most active, thriving, and fully functioning in contexts where they can experience competence, relatedness, and autonomy. As all three are considered basic psychological needs, the neglect or thwarting of any is expected to lead to impoverished functioning and ill-being. This prediction holds not only at the general (cross-domain or time) level, but also within domains, and even within brief time periods.

For example, recently Ryan, Bernstein, and Brown (2010) followed the daily moods and vitality levels of adult workers across their weekly lives. The mood patterns in these adults showed a very robust weekend effect, with rising positive affect and subjective vitality, and lower negative affect, and fewer physical symptoms reported on weekends. The data further showed that the weekend mood effects were fully mediated by the lower experiences of autonomy and relatedness people feel on workdays. Because most workers don't feel much autonomy on their jobs or connection to their work groups, they experience lower happiness. The study proved evidence that on everyday-basis fluctuations in basic psychological need satisfactions substantially account for relative happiness, and even feelings of physical health.

A complementary study by Baard, Deci, and Ryan (2004) showed that employees of banking firms who experienced greater satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while at work also displayed both better performance and greater psychological wellness on the job than those who experienced lesser satisfaction of the basic needs.

The relation between basic psychological need satisfaction and well-being has also been documented in other life domains, and with regard to outcomes from relationship quality to psychopathology. We point to just a few examples. La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci (2000) found that individuals were more securely attached and evidenced more relational well-being within those close relationships where they experienced greater satisfaction of the three psychological needs. Stated differently, satisfaction of each of the needs for autonomy, competence, and

relatedness within a relationship contributed independently to the overall quality of that relationship. Patrick, Knee, Canevello, and Lonsbary (2007) similarly documented the important links between need satisfaction and well-being in close relationships. Further, in two studies of exercise, Wilson, Longley, Muon, Rodgers, and Murray (2006) found that need satisfaction was positively associated with well-being and also that changes in need satisfaction over time were also associated with changes in well-being. Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness (2005) found that basic need satisfaction predicted not only the well being but also the cultural integration (versus cultural estrangement) of both Brazilians and Canadians. Finally, Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, and La Guardia (2006) reviewed substantial research showing that thwarting of the basic psychological needs plays an important role in the development of many psychopathologies ranging for example from rigid character disorders to depression.

Autonomy as a Key to Wellness

SDT asserts not only that basic psychological need satisfactions are associated with well-being, but also the theory highlights how autonomy is particularly relevant to thriving. In this section we discuss the central role played by autonomy, or true self-regulation, for living in a healthy, full-functioning way. Autonomy we argue is central for allowing individuals to grow, and to choose and develop preferred ways of being, which lead to both vitality and happiness. When autonomous, persons are most likely to optimize satisfaction of the psychological needs. Thus, SDT suggests a link from autonomy to need fulfillment, and to the feelings of happiness that derive from need fulfillment.

Autonomy is first and foremost a characteristic of actions. To the extent an action is autonomous it is characterized by feeling volitional or self-endorsed. When people are acting autonomously they are fully behind their own actions—they feel choiceful and integrated in behaving. Accordingly, not all intentional actions are autonomous. Many in fact are motivated by external controls and are experienced as heteronomously motivated. SDT in fact sees motivation as a differentiated phenomenon: There are different types of motivation that vary in their relative autonomy.

In terms of the most general types, SDT distinguishes *intrinsic motivation*, which is characterized by behavior that is motivated by its inherent satisfactions, and *extrinsic motivation*, which is evident in behaviors that are instrumental or done for consequences separable from the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Within the category of extrinsic motivations, SDT makes further differentiations based on the phenomenal source of motivation. These span from externally regulated actions (i.e., actions perceived to be controlled by others) that feel non-autonomous, all the way up to integrated motivations that are experienced as stemming from the actor's most central and important values. We specify four types of extrinsic motivation and emphasize that a person could potentially experience intrinsic motivation and each of the four extrinsic motivations while doing a particular behavior.

Intrinsic motivation. When intrinsically motivated, people engage their environments out of interest and for the sheer enjoyment and challenge in acting. This interested engagement is accompanied by an experience of volition, because when intrinsically motivated people are acting with full willingness. Indeed, any factors in the environment that detract from a sense of volition or choice also undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Thus, in line with SDT, research has shown that intrinsic motivation is supported by meaningful choice (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) and opportunities to experience competence (Vallerand & Reid, 1984), but it is also readily undermined by controlling rewards and other pressures and inducements (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

Intrinsic motivation is especially important in the promotion of intellectual and social development. In early development children learn by playing and exploring, activities that are invariantly intrinsically motivated. Such behaviors do not need to be reinforced or rewarded to occur, but they do require certain social supports or contexts. When children have nurturing environments characterized by autonomy support and non-intrusive parental involvement they are more likely to be robustly intrinsically motivated, whereas deprivations of either autonomy or relatedness inhibit this import inner resource (Grolnick & Seal, 2008). Despite its robust relationships with growth and learning, unfortunately few schools capitalize enough on this inner resource, instead attempting to promote development through external controls and evaluations. Yet when educators do harness intrinsic motivation the results in terms of persistence at and quality of learning can be profound (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

With increasing age people typically spend less time engaged in playful activities, in part because of socialization and the increasing responsibilities that come with social development. Nonetheless, intrinsic motivation remains an important source of both learning and vitality throughout the lifespan. In pursuing intrinsically motivated activities, people experience intrinsic need satisfaction, and restoration from ego-depletion due to external control (Ryan & Deci, 2008a). When intrinsically motivated people also tend to experience positive affect and enjoyment making this kind of free pursuit important to overall happiness.

Extrinsic motivation. Technically the term “extrinsic motivation” refers to doing an activity to obtain an outcome separate from the behavior itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Originally, some theorists (e.g., de Charms, 1968; Harter, 1981) viewed extrinsic motivation in opposition to intrinsic motivation and, thus extrinsic motivation was thought to be invariantly non-autonomous, whereas intrinsic motivation was considered autonomous. SDT argues, however, that although it is true that intrinsic motivation is autonomous, extrinsic motivations can vary in the degree to which they are volitional (Ryan & Connell, 1989), with some being highly autonomous and others being highly controlled. More specifically, SDT distinguishes four types of extrinsic motivation that fall along an underlying continuum of autonomy.

The least autonomous type of extrinsic motivation is *external regulation*, in which the behavior is done to obtain external rewards or to avoid punishments. For example, a worker may produce items efficiently to obtain offered incentives

or to avoid the threat of job loss. Such efficient work would likely be perceived as being regulated by an external source and thus as being controlled. A somewhat more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is *introjected regulation*, in which the reason for the behavior lies in internal (rather than external) contingencies. In introjection a person may act in order to avoid feelings of disapproval or guilt, or, on the “approach side” of introjection, to feel more approval and/or self-esteem. For example, a young musician may practice to avoid feeling guilty for not having done so. Although introjection-based behaviors emanate from dynamic forces inside the person (rather than the proximal social environment), introjected regulation still has the phenomenal feel of forces acting on the self, as the person feels compelled by “shoulds,” by projected evaluations, or by the imagined opinions of others. Thus, like external regulation, behaviors motivated by introjects are experienced as relatively non-autonomous.

A yet more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is labeled *identified regulation*. A person is identified with the regulation of action to the extent that the motives or reasons for acting are personally valued and self-endorsed. There is thus a feeling of ownership and willingness in identified regulation not found in introjection or external regulation. Accordingly, such behaviors are self-congruent and experienced as relatively autonomous. It is noteworthy here that a person can identify with obligations or duties, which even though they may originate “outside” the self can be more or less self-endorsed and truly volitionally undertaken. The final, most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*, in which one identifies with the regulation of the behavior. The identification is then experienced as authentically congruent, including in relation to other aspects of the person’s motivations and practices. When integrated, people are mindfully behind their actions and are volitional and wholehearted in carrying them out. Accordingly they display the highest quality of action.

The importance of considering the degree of internalization and integration of identities, values, and even self-concepts cannot be overstated. In connecting with family and culture people adopt various identifications and behavioral “repertoires” concerning school, morality, religion, politics, health, and all other salient issues and domains. The individual adopts or internalizes these to various degrees and works to integrate them. According to SDT, the less integrated a given identification the less fully functioning the individual will be when enacting it, and the more defensiveness will be required to maintain the identification. SDT further assumes that under typical, “good-enough” conditions people actively attempt to internalize and integrate socially endorsed values, identities, and regulations (Ryan, 1995). These norms, rules, and values will be more fully integrated to the self, and therefore more relatively autonomous, to the extent that: (a) these rules and values are transmitted in an autonomy supportive rather than controlling way; and (b) the rules, norms, or values are themselves not antithetical to basic need fulfillment. In other words, both the process and the content of socialization bear on the readiness of individuals to internalize the regulation of any given behavior.

Internalization is also important with respect to organizational authority and political adherence. The very concept of *legitimacy* is, on the psychological side,

an issue of internalization. When authorities or their regulations are seen by their constituents as not legitimate, this means they are not internalized: They are not backed by the self of the individuals subjected to them. External regulation in the form of force or direct control does not in itself convey legitimacy, and indeed, the appearance of excessive external control can often undermine perceived legitimacy (Bartlett, 2009). In fact, socialization that relies on less coercion is predicted by SDT to facilitate greater internalization, other things being equal. Reciprocally the less-value individuals experience in a regulation the more controlling authorities must become in order to engender compliance. We see this dynamic often in coercive organizations and regimes.

It is also important to see internalization in its complexity. Within the SDT model, underlying most behaviors are multiple forms of regulation. For example, a behavior may be both valued for its outcomes and enjoyable to do, in which case the person might be motivated by both identified regulations and intrinsic motivation. This is often the case in sport (e.g., Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001; Reid, Vallerand, Poulin Crocker, & Farrell, 2009), but also for some individuals in domains such as work, school, and community activities. Other behaviors, such as certain prosocial acts, might be both based in introjections (one feels one should do it) and identified regulations (one experiences personal value in doing it). Since each of these different underlying forms of regulation has distinct properties, knowing the configuration and relative strength of each can be important, as well as the overall *relative autonomy* of behavior, when all motives are considered (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Correlates of relative autonomy. The relative autonomy with which extrinsic motivation is regulated is, according to SDT, differentially associated with full functioning and organismic wellness. The reasons for this are clear: as people more willingly pursue activities they do so with more energy, exhibit more vitality, and have more positive experience. They also tend to perform better and get greater competence satisfaction. Finally, because of people's basic need for relatedness, autonomously pursued activities are often relational, connecting people more deeply with each other. The empirical evidence supporting this claim that relative autonomy predicts both need satisfaction and wellness across settings and cultures is extensive. In what follows we simply illustrate with a few examples.

There is a vast literature applying SDT to education (see Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In part this reflects the importance of autonomy in a domain where learning is the central goal, because there cannot be quality learning without true volition. Accordingly, autonomous self-regulation has been shown to promote greater conceptual learning (e.g., Benware & Deci, 1984; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), performance (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000), and behavioral adjustment (e.g., Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Autonomous self-regulation has also been associated with lower dropout from school (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). The positive role of autonomy support in schools has been identified across a broad array of cultures (Chirkov, 2009).

In the realm of health care it is similarly the case that many health outcomes are dependent on the patient's willingness to engage in changes. In line with this, autonomous self-regulation for health-behavior change has been shown to be a

central predictor of outcomes (see Ryan, Williams, Patrick, & Deci, 2009). For example, more autonomous motivations for smoking cessation predicted smokers' likelihood of maintaining long-term tobacco abstinence (Williams, Niemiec, Patrick, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Among patients with diabetes, Williams et al. (2009) found that autonomous self-regulation for medication use predicted higher perceived competence, greater medication adherence, and improved physiological outcomes.

In the work domain, it is clear that every manager would like employees who were identified with the values of work and interested in a job well done. Managerial autonomy support appears to foster greater need satisfaction, including satisfaction of the autonomy need, and is associated with both greater work engagement and positive experience (Baard et al., 2004; Gagne & Deci, 2005). Interestingly, autonomous self-regulation among unemployed individuals has been associated with greater well-being and job-search intensity (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Dewitte, De Witte, & Deci, 2004).

In the study of ill-being, disturbances of autonomy are highly salient. In fact environments that actively thwart the development of autonomy are implicated in a number of psychopathologies such as borderline personality disorders (e.g., Ryan, 2005). Additionally, in various disorders autonomous regulation is functionally disrupted, leading to compromised outcomes and ill-being (Ryan et al., 2006). Accordingly, recent research on psychotherapy suggests that support for autonomy is critical in ameliorating psychological distress, from depression to impulsive disorders (Ryan & Deci, 2008b; Ryan, Lynch, Vansteenkiste, & Deci, in press; Zuroff et al., 2007).

Although we could more extensively review additional domains, such as sport and exercise (e.g., Pelletier et al., 2001; Standage & Ryan, in press), political engagement (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996), religion (e.g., Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993), volunteer work (Gagne, 2003; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), and other areas of interest, our point is merely to illustrate that autonomy is indeed critical to full functioning and wellness in and across contexts. The findings show that autonomous self-regulation is associated with increased behavioral persistence; improved task performance; and greater psychological, physical, and social wellness. Thus, the relative autonomy with which behavior is regulated appears to be an important antecedent of "the good life" and the happiness that derives from it.

Autonomy and Relatedness: Their Dynamic Interplay

Thus far we have argued that autonomy is functionally critical for healthy development, fulfilling engagement, and a satisfying life. However, for many scholars the very concept of autonomy as a fundamental need is an anathema. In particular, many psychologists view autonomy as being antithetical to the value of relatedness—that is, to the need for being connected with others (e.g., Jordan, 1997; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996). This disparity comes about in part because the concept

of autonomy is conflated with that of independence, selfishness, or individualism. From the SDT perspective, autonomy is not synonymous with any of these concepts, but instead is defined as volition, willingness, and endorsement.

SDT research has shown, for example, that in close friendships, feeling a sense of autonomy is essential for a high-quality relationship, and further that experiencing mutuality of autonomy support is related to relational and personal well-being (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). Similarly, La Guardia et al. (2000) found that the degree to which one experienced satisfaction of the autonomy need within one's closest relationships predicted the quality of those relationships. Of course, if one were to interpret autonomy to mean selfishness and independence—that is, if autonomy were understood to mean doing whatever one feels like doing regardless of one's partner—autonomy would not enhance the relational quality, for people need to feel satisfaction of both the relatedness need and the autonomy need to flourish within the relationship. Simply stated, autonomy, as we define it, is not antagonistic to relatedness, for there is a synergy in the satisfaction of these two needs. In fact people often feel highly autonomous when engaging in behaviors done for their partners (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009). Acting in a way that thwarts either a sense of autonomy or relatedness, however, will result in decrements in interpersonal relational quality and well-being.

Similarly, some have argued that autonomy, while important in western cultures, is not important in eastern cultures where collectivism rather than individualism is the stronger cultural value (e.g., Markus et al., 1996). Yet, SDT argues that one can be autonomous either when acting for a collective or when acting individually. Further of course, one could be controlled when acting in the service of either a collective or oneself. In support of this viewpoint, Chirkov, Ryan, Kaplan, and Kim (2003) found that in both eastern and western cultures (viz., South Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the US) people who reported behaving more autonomously also reported greater psychological well-being, an effect that was not moderated by cultural context. Since then many studies have found similar results.

It is critical then to see the importance of autonomy support across cultural contexts. For example Jang, Reeve, Ryan, and Kim (2009) recently showed how teacher autonomy support enhanced, and teacher controllingness diminished, psychological need satisfaction of Korean high school students, resulting in both more negative academic and well-being outcomes. Here, in a collectivistic setting, autonomy support retains its positive functions in facilitating internalization, need satisfaction and wellness.

This and other research indicates that the autonomy and relatedness needs go hand-in-hand for optimal functioning in relationships and in general regardless of one's culture. Indeed, if the two needs are pitted against each other, as they are when one offers conditional regard, the consequences are negative for the recipient of the regard (e.g., Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). It is also interesting to note that, when people feel autonomous, they will often also feel relatedness for they experience the psychological freedom that allows them to pursue meaningful connections with others.

Differential Aspirations: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Life Goals

Focusing on the relative autonomy of goals is content-free as a prescription for happiness. That is, to suggest that the affordance of autonomy leads to happiness is to suggest that when given an opportunity to self-regulate people tend to optimize need satisfactions and move in a direction of wellness and integrity. Indeed, SDT is based on the assumption that support for autonomy conduces to wellness, implying such a trust in the organismic process.

At the same time, this process-oriented approach concerning “why” people are pursuing some outcome does not preclude an “on average” analysis of the contents of those desired outcomes—that is, of “what” individuals are pursuing. It is no doubt the case that some goals or aims are more and some are less conducive to wellness and happiness. Indeed, it also turns out to be the case that when people are acting more autonomously they are more likely to pursue some types of goals rather than others. Accordingly, in recent years within SDT there has been an active focus on different types of goal contents and their impacts on well-being.

Beginning in the early 1990s Kasser and Ryan (e.g., 1993, 1996) began examining the aspirations people had for their futures and the relations of these life goals to wellness. For example, Kasser and Ryan (1996) surveyed both college students and urban adults concerning their life goals and identified two distinct goal complexes. The first factor, labeled *extrinsic aspirations*, included values for wealth, fame, and an appealing image, whereas the second, labeled *intrinsic aspirations*, included values for personal growth, close relationships, community contribution, and physical health. The structural distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations has since been observed in multiple studies, including one that surveyed samples from 15 cultures throughout the world (Grouzet et al., 2005). As noted earlier, the extrinsic aspirations tend to be those associated with the consumer-oriented, self-centered values that are frequently heralded in modern culture, whereas the intrinsic goals focus on personal development, generative activities, and connections with others, better reflecting a eudaimonic lifestyle Aristotle might have advocated (Ryan et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to ascertain whether the pursuit and attainment of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations differentially predict full functioning and happiness.

In their early study Kasser and Ryan (1996) found that those who placed strong importance on intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations reported higher well-being and lower ill-being in both college students and adults. Subsequently Ryan et al. (1999) found similar results in both the US and Russian samples. Sheldon et al. (2004) showed this pattern across four cultural groups. Vansteenkiste, Neyrinck, Niemiec, Soenens, de Witte, and Van den Broeck (2007) reported that adult employees in Belgium who held an extrinsic (relative to intrinsic) work value orientation evidenced less work-related satisfaction, dedication, and vitality, and more work-family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and turn-over intentions. The deleterious consequences of holding an extrinsic (relative to intrinsic) work value orientation were mediated by need satisfaction experienced at work. In the exercise domain, Sebire, Standage, and Vansteenkiste (2009) showed that intrinsic (relative

to extrinsic) goals predicted cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes through their associations with autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These studies exemplify the growing body of evidence supporting the differential impact of intrinsic versus extrinsic aspirations on happiness and well-being outcomes. Sadly, in fact, evidence amassed over the last seven decades points to a cultural trend within the USA toward more extrinsic goals, which in turn has been linked to increased rates of mental distress and psychopathology (Twenge et al., 2010). The question is how far the extrinsic virus of consumption and self-focus will spread over these next historically and environmentally critical decades.

Attainment of life goals. Other research in SDT has examined how *attaining* intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations (as opposed to just pursuing them) affects life outcomes, including happiness. In contrast to most expectancy-value theories, which suggest that attainment of all valued goals is beneficial to well-being (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1990) regardless of their contents, SDT has a more differentiated prediction. Specifically we suggest that the attainment of intrinsic goals enhances wellness, whereas the attainment of extrinsic goals typically does not. That is, because of their differential associations with the basic psychological needs, SDT asserts that attainment of intrinsic aspirations is likely to promote wellness, whereas attainment of extrinsic aspirations is unlikely to benefit well-being, and may at times contribute to ill-being.

A number of studies have provided support for these hypotheses. Kasser and Ryan (2001) found that attaining intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations was positively associated with higher psychological health and quality of interpersonal relationships. Similar results were also obtained in the Russian and US samples reported by Ryan et al. (1999). In a sample of senior citizens, Van Hiel and Vansteenkiste (2009) reported that attainment of intrinsic aspirations was associated with higher ego-integrity and death acceptance, whereas attainment of extrinsic aspirations was associated with more despair. Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci (2009) used a longitudinal design to examine young adults' goal attainment from 1 to 2 years post-college, an important period marked by transition into adult identities and lifestyles. Results showed that whereas the attainment of intrinsic aspirations promoted psychological health, the attainment of extrinsic aspirations was unrelated to well-being and was positively associated with indicators of ill-being. In line with SDT, the benefits of attaining intrinsic aspirations for psychological health were mediated by satisfaction of the basic psychological needs.

In sum, research from SDT indicates that greater valuing of intrinsic relative to extrinsic life goals is associated with enhancement of psychological wellness, including traditional indicators of happiness. In addition, whereas the attainment of intrinsic goals enhances wellness, attainments of extrinsic goals contribute little to wellness once people are above poverty levels. Importantly, such associations have been observed in numerous contexts, lending credibility to the postulate that basic need satisfaction, which more readily accrues from the pursuit and attainment of intrinsic aspirations, is a universal component of optimal functioning and wellness. Thus, which "good life" people choose to pursue matters, as not all aspirations are equally likely to foster need satisfaction and happiness.

Social Contexts, Need Satisfaction, Autonomy, and Intrinsic Aspirations

Thus far, we have argued and reviewed supportive research concerning: (1) a strong relation between satisfaction of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and people's experiences of full functioning and well-being; (2) autonomous self-regulation (including both intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation) being a reliable predictor of need satisfaction, effective performance, and eudaimonic living; and (3) the pursuit and attainment of intrinsic goals being more likely when people are autonomously motivated and being associated with greater well-being than the pursuit and attainment of extrinsic goals.

We turn now to the role of social contexts in this network of relations. We have argued that when people feel satisfaction of the basic psychological needs they will maintain their intrinsic motivation, internalization extrinsic motivation, and pursue and attain intrinsic goals. Accordingly, SDT has proposed that interpersonal contexts that support satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs represent an optimal context for promoting psychological wellness and effective functioning. In fact, it is likely that more research has addressed the effects of social contexts on motivation, performance, and well-being than any other component of the theory. Accordingly, we will be able to review only a very small percentage of that work.

Considerable research has examined the effects of autonomy-supportive versus controlling social contexts on a range of mediating and outcome variables. For example, the first of these studies (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981) found that when classroom teachers of elementary students were more autonomy supportive the students were more intrinsically motivated, perceived themselves to be more competent at their schoolwork, and had higher self-esteem. Similarly, when managers were more autonomy supportive, their employees were more trusting of the organization and were more satisfied with various aspects of their work lives (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Parents who were judged by observers to be more autonomy supportive had children who were more autonomous in doing their schoolwork and were rated as more competent by their late-elementary-school teachers (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). A study by Pelletier et al. (2001) of elite Canadian swimmers showed that those whose coaches were more autonomy supportive were more autonomously motivated and persisted at their sport longer than those whose coaches were less autonomous.

Similarly, studies have shown that autonomy supportive socializing contexts also lead people to develop more intrinsic life goals. For example, Kasser, Ryan, Zax, and Sameroff (1995) found that when mothers of 4-year old children were authoritarian and cold (i.e., were low in autonomy support) their children tended to place much stronger importance on extrinsic aspiration than on intrinsic aspirations when they were in their late teens. Williams, Cox, Hedberg, and Deci (2000) found that teenagers who experienced their parents as being more autonomy-supportive had more intrinsic goals and were less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as

using tobacco and alcohol and having early sexual intercourse. Finally, Sheldon and Kasser (2008) found that college students who experienced psychological threats tended to become more focused on extrinsic life goals.

The studies of social contextual influences, only a few of which we have mentioned, have been both developmental and social psychological in nature. That is, some of them have examined the effects of socializing contexts on the development of individual differences both with regard to domain-specific autonomy and intrinsic aspirations, as well as on well-being and other positive outcomes. Other studies have examined how autonomy-promoting factors in the immediate social environment facilitate the states of autonomy and wellness. In reviewing most of these studies we have spoken of autonomy-supportive versus controlling contexts, yet some of the studies have been formulated more broadly in terms of need-supportive versus need-thwarting environmental factors. Thus, some studies have found that support for, rather than thwarting of, the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs promotes autonomous motivation and well-being (e.g., Jang et al., 2009; La Guardia et al., 2000; Niemiec et al., 2006). It turns out that typically when an environment is autonomy supportive, it tends also to support the competence and relatedness needs, so some of the studies of autonomy support have been *de facto* studies of need support. This makes sense because authority figures who support autonomy will, because they consider the individual's internal frame of reference, often also provide active support for competence and relatedness or will at least allow the target individuals to pursue their own competence and relatedness satisfaction.

The various studies of need support we have reviewed examined the impacts of relatively proximal factors in the lives of the target participants—parents of children, teachers of students, managers of employees, and physicians of patients, for example. SDT is, however, also concerned with the influence of more distal influences shaped by institutional, cultural, and economic factors. For example, school-district policies affect the motivation and well-being of students in the district, and top-level corporate officers affect the lives of employees who are many levels below them and who may live thousands of miles away. Similarly, insurance company regulations affect the motivation and experiences of individual patients, in part by affecting the behavior of health care professionals but perhaps in other more direct ways as well.

At an even more distal, societal level, economic and political structures can affect the motivation and well-being of individuals within the society, again, either directly or mediated through other more proximal influences. SDT maintains that at each level of proximity, the effects of environmental influences can be analyzed in terms of the degree to which they tend to support versus thwart need satisfaction.

For example, the American corporate capitalist system of economics involves the owners of capital (and their surrogates) using incentives to control individuals' behavior. The advertising industry emphasizes extrinsic goals, such as accumulating material goods and developing an image that will attract attention and recognition. Consequently this economic system does, through these and numerous other pathways, set forth controlling influences that negatively affect the autonomy of

individuals within the culture (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). In addition some of these influences, which emphasize individualism, competition, and sometimes selfishness, are likely to have the functional significance of thwarting people's relatedness as well, further yielding negative effects on their psychological health and well-being (e.g., Kasser et al., 2007). At the same time that the capitalist system has strong controlling and even amotivating elements, it simultaneously provides substantial opportunities for exercising initiative and autonomy for those with skills and/or resources. Unlike central planning economies there is more latitude in choosing careers and locations to live (Deci et al., 2001). Entrepreneurs have opportunities for a wide range of activities that are potentially lucrative and at the same time allow for the experiences of autonomy and competence satisfaction. Thus, for different individuals the system can be experienced differently, providing far more or far less support for their basic needs. Yet it is also important to keep in mind that an abundance of research has shown that tangible rewards do tend on average to be experienced as controlling and thus undermining of autonomy (Deci et al., 1999). Thus it is not surprising that within the capitalist system many people lack autonomy on an everyday basis, a pattern which experiential data from average workers has been supporting (e.g., Ryan et al., 2010).

Other economic systems can be similarly analyzed in terms of supports versus thwarts for basic needs. Political systems can also be so analyzed, as can laws that exist within them. A democratic political system, for example, certainly allows greater support for autonomy than does a totalitarian one (e.g., Downie, Koestner, & Chua, 2007), yet small pockets of great wealth within a democratic system, as is the case in the US, can wield undue control and influence over others in the system, leaving many people feeling amotivated and helpless in relation to politics and the resulting policies.

Our aim here is not to do a comprehensive analysis of economic or political systems, but instead to point out that contextual effects on people's basic psychological needs are a function of multiple interacting levels of influence. Political freedoms, economic opportunities and security (which affords freedoms), and institutional dynamics all impact a person's autonomy, and his or her capacity to fulfill basic needs.

Summary

The SDT approach to understanding happiness distinguishes between happiness that is viewed solely as the relative presence of positive affect and the relative absence of negative affect however those experiences are attained, and happiness that typically results from the experience of what has been called full functioning—that is, of using one's capacities in an open, interested, and committed way, with a full sense of endorsement and concurrence.

Autonomy, or true self-regulation, and intrinsic goals are critical elements for the SDT approach to full functioning and to the happiness typically associated with it. When people act autonomously, rather than being controlled or amotivated, they act

with a sense of choice, are more mindful, think flexibly, and express their values and interests. Such actions provide basic need satisfaction that results in psychological health and well-being at both the state level and the more-enduring person level. Further, pursuing and attaining intrinsic goals such as personal development, relationships, community, and health, rather than extrinsic goals such as material goods, fame, and image have been found to be associated with greater need satisfaction and enhanced wellness.

To be autonomous, to act from one's intrinsic interests and from internalized values and regulations are inherent human processes. Remarkably, these integrative and need fulfilling tendencies lead people to connect with each other, and to identify with people outside themselves and close kin. Autonomy is in this sense a key to true community. Yet these natural processes require nutriments and supports, both proximal and distal, to function effectively. As we know from evolutionary psychology our human nature is contingent; what our genes provide is not a set of specific behaviors but a capacity to develop certain behaviors and sensibilities under specifiable environmental conditions (Wilson, 1996). SDT specifically argues that for people to manifest intrinsic motivation, healthy internalization, and need satisfying life-goals they require social and cultural supports for the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs. The availability of such supports is affected by social contexts ranging in proximity from individual relationships to ambient cultural structures, to economic and political systems. These all influence motivation and wellness by representing either supports for or obstacles to satisfaction of these basic psychological needs. In short, human thriving, full functioning, and the happiness that entails psychological freedom and the life well-lived result when people act more autonomously, pursue more intrinsic goals, and experience satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

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