

## Motivation and fundamental psychological needs in Self-Determination Theory



**Autonomous motivation:** Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation. It posits that people flourish when our actions and goals are self-determined and self-actualising – that is, when we are doing what we want to do and acting in accordance with our sense of self (Sheldon, Applying SDT, 2003: 362). In contrast, our motivations are blunted and our wellbeing is undermined when we feel pressured to act, or feel that we are being controlled by others. In such circumstances, people struggle to engage and persist, and are ill-equipped to face new challenges.

**Basic psychological needs:** According to SDT, autonomous motivation is the key to psychological wellbeing (and other positive outcomes such as persistence, personal growth and achievement) because when we act through our own volition, and in concordance with our deep values and interests, we are more likely to experience feelings of personal autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy, competence and relatedness are basic psychological needs, and regular experiences of need-satisfaction are known to enhance mental wellbeing, performance and achievement. Experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness also foster and sustain autonomous motivation in a mutually supporting spiral.

- Autonomy is the experience of acting intentionally (having volition) and in accordance with our interests and values (from an integrated sense of self).
- Competence is the experience of being good or effective at what one does, or the belief that one can become so.
- Relatedness includes a sense of belonging to a social or institutional community, and the experience of close relationships in which we care for and are cared for by others.

**Developmental tendencies:** SDT posits that autonomy, competence and relatedness are 'basic' psychological and cross-cultural psychological needs because humans have natural, evolved tendencies to strive for personal growth, mastery of new challenges, integration of new experiences to form a coherent sense of self, and integration within social groups and communities. These natural developmental tendencies can be either nurtured or thwarted. To realise our potential, we require ongoing social and psychological 'nutriments': these are provided by regular experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Denial of the basic need for experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness thwarts our development and results in psychological distress, ill-being and associated reactive behaviours.

**Social contexts:** Autonomous motivation and need-satisfaction are directly and indirectly supported (or undermined) by social and institutional environments. In university learning environments, students' psychological needs are satisfied when teaching and learning practices scaffold and recognise students' competence, encourage and support autonomy, facilitate close relationships, and foster a sense of belonging and acceptance. By contrast, students' psychological needs are thwarted when teaching and learning practices make students feel incompetent, incapable; controlled or pressured by others' directives and values; unable to form close relationships with others; excluded, rejected or dehumanised.

Moreover, SDT research has established that the 'autonomy-supportive' qualities of social and educational environments can be improved. In educational contexts, where teachers and administrators have decision-making power and are attempting to influence or direct the behaviour

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of students, 'autonomy-support' has three key components:

- acknowledging students' perspectives and experiences,
- giving students as much choice as possible to act in accordance with their values and strengths and explore intrinsic or emerging interests, and
- providing a meaningful rationale when choice-provision is not possible so that students internalise the importance and value of the required tasks (Sheldon, Applying SDT, 2003, 367).

### SDT: Contexts, Basic Needs, Motivation and Outcomes

