

### Abstract

Human beings have fundamental psychological propensities toward growth, integrity, and wellness. Yet, historically, many approaches to motivation have ignored these inner propensities, focusing instead on how external contingencies shape expectancies and behaviors. This chapter reviews recent work in *self-determination theory*, an organismic approach in which people's intrinsic, growth-oriented propensities are a central focus. Self-determination theory argues that people have basic psychological needs to experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness to others. Satisfaction of these basic needs facilitates autonomous motivation and wellness, whereas the frustration of these needs contributes to ill-being and is associated with lower quality, and often highly controlled, forms of motivation. Autonomous and controlled forms of motivation differ in their antecedents, neurological underpinnings, and outcomes. Although most of the experimentation and evidence base of self-determination theory has focused on proximal relationships (e.g., families, dyads, classrooms, teams, or workgroups), recent research is extending self-determination theory to address pervasive contexts (e.g., cultural or economic systems) and how they both directly and indirectly affect need satisfaction and motivation, thereby impacting people's development and wellness. Pervasive contexts also influence people's aspirational horizons and the life goals they pursue, further influencing both individual and community wellness. More need-supportive contexts conduce to more authentic living and intrinsic aspirations, which in turn promote more prosocial attitudes and actions and greater personal and societal wellness.

**Keywords:** self-determination theory, autonomy, motivation, control, intrinsic motivation, life goals, aspirations, political contexts, economic contexts

As living entities, we are born to flourish. From the standpoint of organismic theories within all individuals there is a natural propensity to actively engage, assimilate, and master one's environments. There is a desire to learn, to grow, and, where possible, to develop and express capacities, talents, and interests. Finally, as social creatures, humans have a need to connect with others in sharing, love, work, and meaning.

Many of the major theories and traditions in behavioral science have grappled poorly with these clearly built-in human propensities. In part, this is the heritage of decades of behaviorism, in which the primary focus was on how to control behavior

from outside the organism using potent contingencies of reinforcement (see R. M. Ryan, Bradshaw, & Deci, in press). Because this approach could produce powerful experimental results in controlled laboratory conditions, it led to an emphasis on the malleability of behavior and contributed to a "standard social science model" (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992), in which behavior was seen as something stamped in by social environments and cultures, rather than being grounded in basic or inherent needs or strivings. Often denigrating the significance of inner experience (e.g., Skinner, 1953, 1971), the theoretical focus of behaviorists thus enabled decades of scientific neglect of natural human

propensities toward growth and research on what supports and hinders their expression.

*Self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2017) stands in contrast to behaviorist and, more generally, standard social science models in its strong assumptions about the nature of humans. As an organismic perspective, SDT begins by assuming an active human nature that entails a specific direction of movement toward growth, coherence, and wellness. People are understood as inherently prone to develop toward greater capacities for self-regulation and integrity, and much empirical evidence supports SDT's claims concerning the spontaneity and pervasiveness of these hypothesized tendencies. Yet even more important within SDT is the idea that these propensities toward growth and integrity are not automatic. Instead, SDT argues that propensities toward flourishing are more or less robustly expressed as a function of particular social conditions. Social contexts that support basic psychological needs foster flourishing, whereas those in which these needs are thwarted derail the integrative trajectory of human development and move individuals toward defense and self-protection. Thus, in

SDT *self-actualization* is understood as dynamic, with propensities to flourish catalyzed by some social environments and suppressed by others, a dynamic that can be studied at levels of analyses from interpersonal settings to broader cultural, political, and economic contexts.

### **Motivation and Wellness Within Self-Determination Theory**

Again, the organismic perspective is that in healthy development, individuals move in the direction of greater autonomy and self-regulation. This entails internalizing and integrating external regulations of behavior and learning to manage drives and emotions, while staying connected within a social world. As well, it means maintaining intrinsic motivation and interest, which are vital to assimilating new ideas and experiences. When people are more autonomously regulated, they exhibit greater engagement and vitality in activities, relationships, and life projects. Thus, autonomy is an integral aspect of full functioning and wellness at every age.

Yet autonomy is not just an individual affair. Across the life span, autonomy develops within

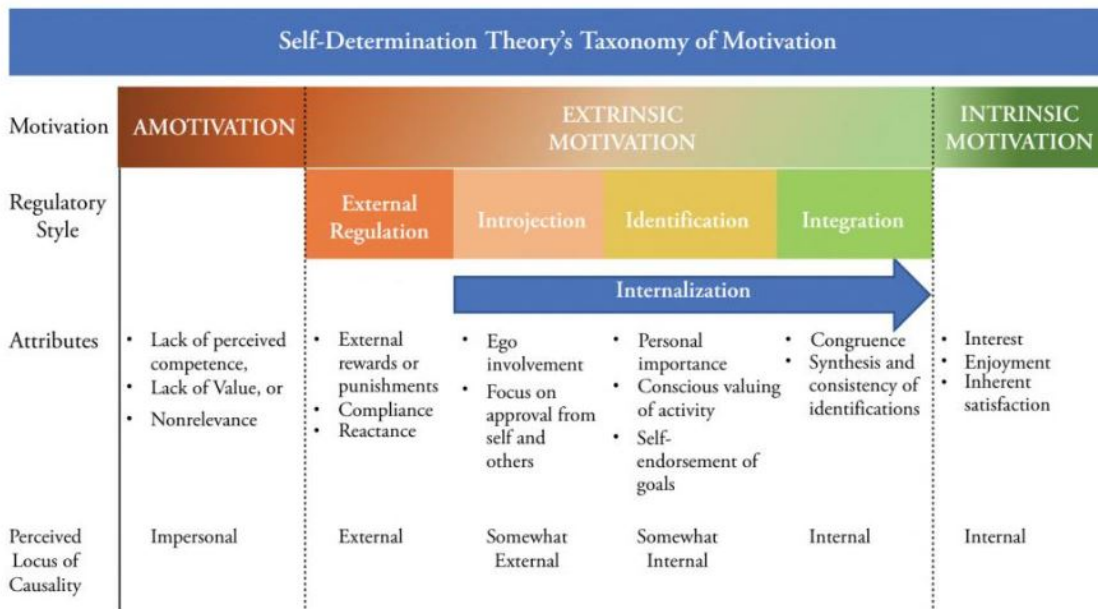
Ryan, 2018). But having proximal social supports, especially in family, friendship, and community settings, for being oneself is critical to wellness in everyday life (e.g., Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). Beyond these proximal interpersonal settings, however, autonomy can be supported or undermined by larger institutional, economic, and cultural forces. For example, societal institutions and laws can support or hinder people's rights (Rawls, 2001) and capabilities (Sen, 1999) to pursue what matters most to them, impacting autonomy, competence and relatedness, and ultimately psychological and physical wellness (DeHaan, Hirai, & Ryan, 2016; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2017). Across history people have fought to escape oppressive rule and to protect or gain rights and resources and, thus, to better actualize valued aims and ideals (Welzel, 2013). Such struggles continue in the early 21st century, with respect to both totalitarian regimes and the controlling forces of wealth, power, and ideology wherever they subjugate or disenfranchise individuals or groups.

### **Contexts and Basic Psychological Needs**

Social contexts exert their impact on individual

motivation and wellness by facilitating versus impairing satisfaction of *basic psychological needs*. Within SDT, *needs* are defined as organismic necessities for health. Basic psychological needs are a subset of these necessities, those that are essential for psychological growth, integrity, and wellness. Three specific needs have been widely researched with the theory, namely, the need for *competence*, or to feel capable and effective in negotiating important life tasks and experiences; the need for *relatedness*, or to feel connected to, significant, and cared for by others; and the need for *autonomy*, or to experience one's behavior as self-determined and volitional. To the extent that these needs are satisfied, people thrive, but to the extent that the need satisfactions are blocked or frustrated, negative experiential and functional outcomes accrue. Self-determination theory focuses on how social contexts at each level of proximity, from interpersonal interactions to pervasive cultural conditions, facilitate versus impede satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

It is worth noting that these three postulated needs—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—were not simply assumed or formulated based on



**Figure 6.1** The self-determination theory's taxonomy of motivation.  
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