



Reflections on the Legacy of Self-Determination Theory

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It is very fitting that *Motivation Science* publishes a *Legacy* piece on self-determination theory (SDT) in 2021 (Ryan & Deci, 2021). This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first contribution originating from SDT (Deci, 1971), namely the three-study article on the negative effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation. However, as important as this initial research was, it was only the beginning of a gigantic journey for what is arguably the most dominant motivation theory in psychology. Over the years, I have made a number of conceptual points regarding SDT (e.g., Vallerand, 2000; Vallerand et al., 2008). Below I focus on what I see as some of its major contributions.

A first contribution of SDT is to squarely emphasize the role of psychological needs in motivation theory. Whereas most motivation theories of the 1970's put their emphasis on cognitions without specifying why such cognitions (and not others) were important, SDT took the bold step of positing that *innate* needs were crucial motivational determinants. For reasons too numerous to enumerate here, one should remember that needs were generally held in disdain by most scientists in the second part 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, to focus on innate needs was not a popular stand at that time. Initially, there was the need for *self-determined competence* (Deci, 1975) that was later split into the needs for autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1980) after a convincing exposition of the fundamental role of the need for self-determination or autonomy (Deci, 1980). Finally, the need for relatedness was proposed in 1991 (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Other theorists such as Abraham Maslow (1943), Carl Rogers (1963), and Robert White (1959), had also emphasized needs. However, Ryan and Deci went beyond armchair psychology and formulated SDT in such a way that it became possible to formulate and empirically test hypotheses on the needs' motivational impact. The fact that such hypotheses were tested in lab

and field experiments in a number of realms such as social, personality, and developmental psychology, and in fields as varied as education, work, sports and exercise, politics, and mental and physical health in a variety of cultures, allowed SDT to cover much of psychology. Such research has provided strong support for SDT and the need perspective (see Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), firmly establishing SDT as a major comprehensive motivational theory.

A second major SDT contribution has been to expand the construct of extrinsic motivation. Whereas the construct of intrinsic motivation was pretty clear from the start and even as later expanded upon (e.g., Carbonneau & Vallerand, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2018), extrinsic motivation was less straightforward. Based on Richard Ryan's (1982) dissertation, it became evident that different types of extrinsic motivation existed, including internal ones. This has led to SDT's *internalized* continuum of extrinsic motivation that includes introjected, identified, and integrated regulation. These three forms of internalized extrinsic motivation (along with external regulation) have changed how we now define extrinsic motivation. We cannot simply use the term "extrinsic motivation" anymore but must specify the *type* of extrinsic motivation we are referring to in order to predict their effects. Indeed, SDT posits, and research has shown, that depending on the level of autonomy (or quality) of the internalization process involved, some types of extrinsic motivation (identified and integrated regulation) lead to more adaptive consequences than others (external and introjected regulation). This theoretical contribution was a giant step in the understanding of the effects of extrinsic motivation in real-life outcomes.

A third SDT contribution is that it focused on the positive effects of motivation very early on. As such, SDT was a precursor of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) by identifying motivational processes that facilitate adaptive forms of motivation and outcomes years before it was fashionable to do so. At the same time, SDT also underscored motivational processes that lead to maladaptive consequences, such as rewards (e.g., Deci, 1971) and social

control (Deci & Ryan, 1987). By focusing on both adaptive and maladaptive motivational processes, SDT has found itself in a position to formulate useful blueprints for interventions and applications (see Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Perhaps a final SDT contribution has been to champion a strong conceptual organismic perspective from which a number of other theoretical models have been launched. Such models include Ken Sheldon's Self-Concordance Model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), Tim Kasser's Value Model (2002), and Rich Koestner's Goal progress model (Koestner, 2008). Also building from SDT, I personally have focused on how best to integrate the different forms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation at different levels of generality (from personality to contextual and to situational levels) leading to the Hierarchical Model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 1997). More recently, I have focused on how SDT's internalization process can also apply to activities that people love thereby leading to harmonious and obsessive forms of passion and how these affect the quality of people's life (Vallerand, 2010, 2015; Vallerand & Houliort, 2019). All of the above models have benefitted from crucial theoretical insights that originated from SDT as well as the intellectual support from the Ryan and Deci team. Such support should not be overlooked as a major contribution to the scientific community.

I could elaborate on a number of other SDT contributions just as we could debate on some of the SDT tenets that scientists may not all agree on. Unfortunately, space does not allow us to pursue such a discussion. Nevertheless, most scientists will agree that the legacy of SDT is immense, systematic, and comprehensive (to this effect, see Ryan & Deci, 2017). Such a contribution reflects positively on the two scientists who have initiated scientific research on SDT some 50 years ago and in doing so have taken the field of motivation science to new heights.

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