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Relative Autonomy Continuum

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Synonyms

Amount of felt self-determination; Degree of internalization; Perceived locus of causality

Definition

A theoretical sequence which orders many different types of motivation into a single continuum.

Introduction

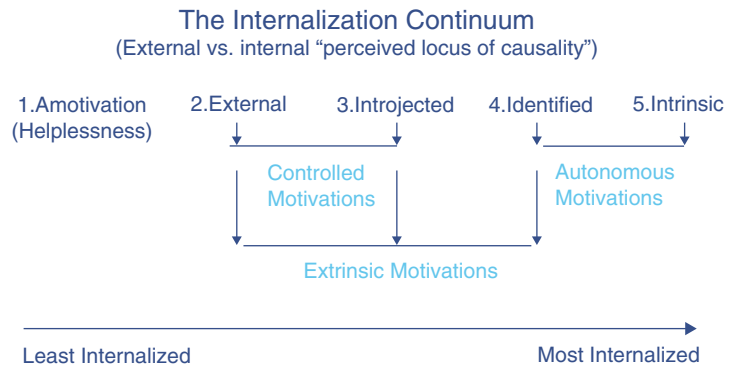
The “relative autonomy continuum” (RAC) is a foundational concept within self-determination theory (SDT), in particular within SDT’s “organismic integration” mini-theory (Deci and Ryan 1990). SDT postulates that all motivated behaviors can be located on an internalization continuum ranging from very little felt autonomy at one extreme to very much felt autonomy at the other extreme. According to the theory, autonomy is first and foremost a characteristic of experience. When people feel autonomous, they feel they are

standing fully behind their own actions, with a corresponding “internal perceived locus of causality” for their own behavior. In contrast, when people feel nonautonomous, they feel controlled, forced, and pressured in their behavior, with an “external perceived locus of causality” for that behavior. The RAC is meant to contain and explain this important dimension of intentional behavior.

Types of Motivation

The RAC is typically broken down into four types of motivation, ranging from external motivation (with no felt autonomy) to introjected motivation (with some felt autonomy) to identified motivation (with much felt autonomy) to intrinsic motivation (with a complete sense of autonomy). The first three motivations are called “extrinsic” motivations because they are not done for their own sake, but rather for some separable reward or reinforcement (see below for more detail on each of these motivations). In contrast, intrinsic motivation entails performing a behavior because it is interesting, enjoyable, or challenging (Deci 1975). When a person is intrinsically motivated, the behavior is its own reward. Although early SDT researchers viewed all extrinsically motivated behaviors as nonautonomous, SDT now proposes that extrinsic motivations can vary greatly in their relative autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000). For example, people might perform the same instrumental task of “weeding the

Relative Autonomy Continuum, Fig. 1 The relative autonomy continuum



garden” because they won’t get paid if they don’t (external motivation, not at all autonomous), because they feel it is their turn to weed and they’d feel guilty if they didn’t (introjected motivation, somewhat autonomous), or because they are strong believers in urban agriculture and this behavior expresses their values, even if it isn’t much fun (identified motivation; quite autonomous).

Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of the relative autonomy continuum (RAC), which we will use to further explicate the different types of motivation. At the leftmost extreme is *amotivation*, which is typically contrasted with the various forms of motivation to the right. Amotivation involves acting passively, with no sense of intending to do what one is doing and with no real expectation of success. In the latter sense, amotivation is akin to the concept of helplessness and results when people feel that they are unable to achieve any kind of desired outcome.

Next to amotivation, the least autonomous form of intentional motivation is *external motivation*, which is the classic type of extrinsic motivation based in rewards and punishments and studied in operant behaviorism. When externally motivated, people act to gain desired external incentives, or to avoid threatened punishments. This type of motivation has poor maintenance and transfer, because externally motivated behaviors tend to cease as soon as the external contingencies are removed.

Introjected motivation is the next type of extrinsic motivation on the relative autonomy continuum. With this type of motivation, people

feel internally compelled to do “what they have to do” – to maintain contingent self-esteem and feelings of worth, to avoid self-derogation after failure, or to attain ego enhancement such as pride from the approval of others. Although they are based in internal forces, introjected motivations are not really experienced as part of the integrated self.

The next type of extrinsic motivation is *identified motivation* which is a relatively self-determined (or autonomous) type of extrinsic motivation. In this case, people have managed to identify with the personal importance of an instrumental activity, due to its expression of their own values and goals. That is, they have accepted the extrinsic motivation as their own by transforming it into a personally endorsed course of action. Identified motivations are noteworthy because they can involve doing something one hates to do (e.g., cold-calling potential donors, asking them to contribute to one’s organization), but not minding it, because the behavior expresses an internalized value (e.g., helping an organization that one identifies with). Thus, identified motivation is a hallmark of the mature personality, viewed as a willingness to accept responsibility to perform important duties and tasks, even when these are onerous to perform.

Although it is not represented in Fig. 1, some SDT researchers also measure “integrated” motivation, thought to be the most self-determined type of extrinsic motivation. Integrated motivation is said to result when identified motivations have fully assimilated into the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into

congruence with all of one's *other* identifications and values. Actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their own sake.

Finally, as discussed above, *intrinsic motivation* is the state of doing an activity because it is inherently interesting and satisfying. Intrinsic motivation is the prototype of autonomous or self-determined behavior and is typically accompanied by an experience of autonomy, volition, meaningful choice, and free pursuit. When people are intrinsically motivated, they are typically more creative, more flexible, more persistent, more likely to find flow, and more likely to engage in deep learning related to what they are doing.

Statistical Background

The RAC structure was originally described as a “quasi-simplex” (Ryan and Connell 1989), which according to Guttman is a linear correlational structure in which adjacent dimensions are positively correlated with the strength of associations weakening the further away two dimensions are from each other on the continuum. Sheldon et al. (2017) recently provided new evidence in support of the RAC, using multidimensional scaling and confirmatory factor analytic techniques to show that there is a second-order simplex structure that links the first-order factors corresponding to external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic motivation. Sheldon et al. (2017) also showed that introjection can be broken down into avoidance-based introjection (avoid guilt) and approach-based introjection (approach self-esteem), with the latter form of introjection lying between negative introjection and full identification on the RAC.

Promoting Autonomy

What helps people to internalize extrinsically motivated behavior, such that they come to “own” behaviors that formerly felt forced and pressured? SDT's “organismic integration” mini-theory

proposes that internalization is more likely to occur when authorities within the context support the autonomy of subordinates. This means that subordinates should be offered choices to the greatest extent possible, should be provided with meaningful rationales when they are asked to engage an uninteresting task, and should be treated with respect and understanding as autonomous agents who can choose to cooperate with the authority, rather than as subservient pawns who can be forced to cooperate whether they like it or not.

Consequences of Autonomy

Many experimental and field studies have examined the correlates and consequences of autonomous motivation (which is usually calculated as a composite of intrinsic and identified motivation) versus controlled motivation (which is usually calculated as a composite of introjected and external motivation). Like intrinsic motivation, relatively autonomous motivation has been consistently shown to be associated with greater behavioral persistence and stamina; with enhanced performance (at such domains as school, work, sport), especially on heuristic activities; and with more positive affect and higher levels of psychological well-being.

Individual Differences in Motivation According to SDT

These six types of motivation (intrinsic, integrated, identified, introjected, external, and amotivation) combined to form unique motivational profiles for individuals. For example, some people are characterized by high intrinsic and identified motivation (i.e., high autonomous motivation), medium or low introjected and external motivation (controlled motivation), and a moderately low level of amotivation, while others demonstrate low to medium levels of autonomous motivation, high levels of controlled motivation, and moderately high levels of amotivation. Still others show a third relatively widespread profile, with high levels of both autonomous and

controlled motivation and low level of amotivation. Usually those with high intrinsic and identified motivation show the highest degree of academic adjustment (less school anxiety, distraction in class, absenteeism, more school satisfaction, and higher academic achievement) (Ratelle et al. 2007), sport achievements, and subjective well-being (Sheldon et al. 2017).

Conclusion

The relative autonomy continuum is at the heart of contemporary self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2017) and has inspired thousands of motivational studies. It represents the degree of freewill experienced by the individual and has important effects within people's lives, regardless of whether feelings of self-determination are scientifically or philosophically justifiable.

Cross-References

- [Autonomy Need](#)
- [Motivation](#)
- [Self-Determination Theory](#)
- [Well-Being](#)

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