

Self-Determination Theory: Condensed

A brief overview of my "Self-Determination Theory: Condensed" project, which I am publishing online

Background

Self-Determination Theory is a contemporary theory of human motivation and well-being.

At the very highest level, it posits that humans have fundamental basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, humans will be motivated, grow and flourish, but when these needs are not met, this is detrimental to a person's wellbeing.

Self-Determination Theory is an empirical theory, that has been supported by hundreds of laboratory and real-world studies over the last few decades.

In 2017, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan published a comprehensive account of the entire theory, together with supporting evidence, in a volume titled **"Self-Determination Theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness"**

Popularization

In recent years, many of the ideas from Self-Determination Theory have been articulated in popular books.

Dan Pink's book "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" draws on many ideas from Self-Motivation, and concepts of "Mastery, Autonomy and Purpose" identified in that book as crucial for motivation closely mirror SDT's Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness.

In the field of parenting, Alfie Kohn's books such as "Punished by Rewards" and "Unconditional Parenting" also draw extensively on Self-Determination Theory and related studies, and highlight considerations such as the strong negative effects of rewards, and conditional regard, on intrinsic motivation and overall well-being.

Books such as these have been extremely helpful in questioning certain aspects of conventional wisdom, in particular regarding the relationship between rewards and motivation. They have become popular, and I regularly come across key themes from them in blog posts about management, parenting, education etc.

Despite being strongly supported by evidence, I don't think these ideas have supplanted "conventional wisdom" yet - if one looks at political discourse around education, for example, this still strongly assumes a model of control through punishment and rewards (at least this is true in the UK and the US, perhaps other countries have more sophisticated political discourse).

Nevertheless, these ideas are now well-known, and I see them widely shared and repeated in blog posts about management, education, parenting etc.

Effects of Popularization: Dilution and Distortion

I think the popularization of these ideas is wonderful. However as these ideas spread through popular books, through blog posts, and social media, I think a couple of negative things happen.

The first is that the ideas get diluted. Popular writers aren't held to the same high standards as scientists in terms of taking a balanced view across all the available evidence. We all know that some popular science books cherry pick evidence in order to support a compelling overall narrative (see: [The Gladwell Effect](#)).

Given this background, it is easy to read a book like Dan Pink's "Drive" or Alfie Kohn's "Unconditional Parenting" and fail to realize quite how *compelling* the evidence is for some of the claims that they are making. The principles they are sharing are not simply curious counterpoints to conventional thinking - they truly are principles to live by, because there is an overwhelming base of evidence in support of what they are saying in their respective fields.

The second problem is that ideas get distorted. Popularizers have to simplify things. And they need to write compelling books, so sometimes they *do* twist data, or cherry-pick to support their overall narrative. And when ideas get recycled through blog posts, social media etc., some level of distortion of the original ideas is inevitable.

One example of such a distortion, in the domain of parenting, is the conflation of praise with rewards...

In Self-Determination Theory, tangible rewards are understood to strongly undermine intrinsic motivation. However praise, even though it is pleasurable to receive, operates very differently from tangible rewards, and in most cases praise will enhance, rather than diminish, intrinsic motivation.

Yet among the wide array of blog posts I see being shared regarding the problems inherent in offering rewards to children, this distinction is frequently lost, and I see praise being discouraged, as "just another kind of reward" (and we all know, *rewards* are *bad*).

Returning to the Source

It was out of a sense of wanting to know "what the science really says" that I bought a copy of Deci and Ryan's "Self-Determination Theory", and began to read it. It had just been published, and it looked like the definitive resource to use to really understand the science behind these ideas, to understand the weight of evidence for the theory, and to understand exactly what the theory says.

"Began" being the crucial word, as we shall see...

Deci and Ryan's book is an extraordinary accomplishment - a comprehensive survey of over 4 decades of psychology research, an extremely detailed articulation of all aspects of Self-Determination Theory, the evidence that supports it, the areas where uncertainty remains, and its applications across a wide range of fields of life.

However, it is written for an academic audience, is extremely long and can be difficult to digest. I found myself unable to read it cover to cover, and began dipping into the parts that seemed most relevant to me.

As I read through these chapters, I kept coming back to two strong conflicting thoughts:

1. This is amazing! Everyone who is interested in this sort of stuff should read this.

2. This is such hard work! Almost nobody is going to read this.

There will be some people for whom Deci and Ryan's book hits just the right note in terms of level of detail and complexity. But for the rest of us... I started to visualize what I really wanted to see: a condensed version of the text, which covers all the key ideas and evidence - but at significantly less length.

To my knowledge, no such overview of SDT exists.

There are summaries of SDT, for example [here](#) or [here](#), but I have not found these to be particularly helpful. They are too high-level. I read them, and I don't feel any the wiser about what SDT really says...

I need more detail than that, to understand what the various aspects of the theory really mean. But not so much detail that I get swamped, and can't see the wood for the trees (which is what happens when I try to read the original book).

This project is intended to hit this middle ground. I know it will be useful for me. And I hope that it will be useful for others too.

Self-Determination Theory: Condensed

At the moment, I am working to create condensed versions of key chapters from Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. I am publishing these online, free for everyone to read.

I am starting with the 7 chapters (6 to 13) in which they outline the 6 "mini-theories" of SDT. Later, I hope to provide the same treatment for the applied chapters on topics that are of particular interest to me (Parenting, Education & Management). Whether I find the time and energy to go beyond that remains to be seen...

My goal is to cover the content of each chapter, with approximately 1/3rd of the length.

This brings each chapter to 4,000-5,000 words, or about 15-20 minutes of reading - so (when I've completed this project) it should be possible to read through the fundamentals of SDT (6 mini-theories, plus some applications) in 2-3 hours.

I'm achieving this by:

- Trying to "get to the point" of each section as concisely as I can
- Skipping over details of experimental design, except where they seem particularly important
- Avoiding repetition as much as possible.

This is intended to be a "condensed" version of the book, but not necessarily "simplified" or "popular"

- I am still trying to cover the vast majority of the substance in each chapter
- I am not simplifying vocabulary vs. the original text. There are some complicated and technical terms used, and I'm assuming readers will look up words and concepts they aren't familiar with this.

I am matching the original text with the overall structure and sub-headings. One key benefit of this is that if something that I have written looks questionable or dubious, it is easy to cross-reference with the original text. Very occasionally, for reasons of flow, I have moved sentences or paragraphs between sections, but this is rare.

Available Content

Here's a summary of the content that I am working on.

The 6 mini-theories of SDT:

1. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) concerns **intrinsic motivation**, motivation that is based on the satisfactions of behaving “for its own sake”.
 - Chapter 6 (CET Part I) - available now
 - Chapter 7 (CET Part II) - available now
2. Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) concerns **extrinsic motivation**, motivation that is based on some instrumental effect that the action is expected to lead to.
 - Chapter 8 (OIT) - available by mid-July 2021
3. Causality Orientations Theory (COT) concerns individual differences that moderate the impacts of CET and OIT.
 - Chapter 9 (COT) - available by end-July 2021
4. Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) elaborates the concept of psychological needs, and relates them to psychological health and well-being
 - Chapter 10 (BPNT) - available by mid-Aug 2021
5. Goal Contents Theory
 - Chapter 11 (GCT) - available by end-Aug 2021
6. Relationships Motivation Theory
 - Chapter 12 (RMT) - available by mid-Sep 2021

Applied chapters (coming later this year)

- Chapter 13: Parenting - Availability TBC
- Chapter 14: Schools and Education - Availability TBC
- Chapter 21: Work and Organizations - Availability TBC

Links

For further information on Self-Determination Theory, see the following links

<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/books/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-determination_theory

Contact

If you'd like to contact me about any aspect of this project, please see the contact details in my Medium profile.

