Self-determination Theory and Public Policy

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Overview

Though several theories of human motivation exist in academic psychology, the self-determination theory provides a reputable lens to understand motivation in human behavior and grounds itself with empirical evidence. The theory applies itself broadly and the research presented here focuses on self-determination theory as it applies to policy. This application is relevant for designers and other professionals working within policy and law making.

Components of Self-determination Theory

Basic Psychological Needs

To understand how motivation works within the framework of self-determination theory, it is essential to understand its key assumptions of people. The theory assumes people act individually and collectively as "active organisms with innate tendencies towards psychological growth and development, [striving] to master challenges, and to integrate experiences into a coherent sense of self" (Kent, 2006).

This behavior characterizes self-determination or autonomy. It means a person interacts with the world as it engages them. They drive themselves to understand and successfully navigate their surroundings and use their experiences to understand who they are. These behaviors do not happen automatically and need continual social nourishment and supports.

Self-determination theory claims all people have basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness to others, and autonomy. Self-determination theory defines needs as the components "essential for psychological growth, integrity, and wellness;" Competence is a person's ability to navigate their "external and internal environments;" Relatedness is the connection a person experiences with other people or groups; and finally autonomy is the ability to have ownership over their behavior and lives (Deci & Ryan, 2012). For example, a person meets their sense of competency when they are capable of achieving success or efficiency. Secondly, people meet their need for relatedness to others through people or groups accepting them. Finally people meet their need for autonomy or "the capacity for and desire to experience self-regulation and integrity" through living life free from external control (Deci and Ryan, 2012).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Self-determination theory posits motivation in human behavior fits broadly into two categories—intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation "involves doing an activity because it is interesting and enjoyable" (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Accordingly, an intrinsically motivated person's behavior is "fully volitional and endorsed" (Moller, Ryan & Deci, 2006). Extrinsic motivation differs from intrinsic motivation and "involves doing an activity because it leads to a separable consequence—the goal is separate from the activity itself" (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

While humans enjoy intrinsically motivated behaviors and find extrinsically motivated behavior distasteful, internalization is a phenomenon working to reconcile the negative associations of extrinsic motivation. It is "an active, natural process in which [people] attempt to transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulations" (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The process parses internalization into five categories ranging from no autonomy acting within the person to complete autonomy acting within the person.

External regulation is motivation driven by the pursuit of rewards or avoiding punishment. The regulation exists outside the self because the person has not yet internalized it. As people internalize the behavior they feel pressured to follow, their motivation becomes internally regulated rather than externally regulated. Introjected regulation is only partially internalized and submits to self-esteem-based contingencies. It "is not informed by a reflective endorsement" (Moller et al., 2006). For example, a student does not want to study but does because he believes his worth as an individual is equal to his academic success and avoids worthlessness and failure.

Moving along the continuum of regulation, identified regulation is further internalized and begins to share the qualities of intrinsic motivation as the person "understand[s] and accept[s] the real importance of the activity itself (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Finally, once a person not only identifies the important behaviors but also "[integrates those identifications with other aspects of the self" they display integrated regulation and reach the highest form of internalization of extrinsic motivation (Moller et al, 2006; Ryan 1995). Self-determination theory also adds that types of regulations can co-occur and form a person's relative autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Conell, 1989).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Context

Part of how people experience intrinsic or extrinsic motivation depends on social contexts. Informational (or autonomous) contexts support autonomy and promote or signify competence in people; controlling contexts pressure people produce particular outcomes; and finally amotivating contexts communicate to people their incompetence to master an activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Furthermore these contexts happen at both the state-level and domain-level. In State-level contexts people's motivation prompt at particular time or situation while in domain-level contexts, people's motivations are defined in and by specific areas of life—such as school, home, or work (Deci & Ryan, 2012). However according to research done by Deci & Ryan 1985, despite

the context being informational, controlling, or amotivating at the state or domain level, there are "substantial individual differences in people's interpretation of, or orientation toward" contexts (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Causality Orientations

The other part of how people experience intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is within the self, coloring all what they experience. Self-determination theory identifies three types of causality orientations.

The first is the autonomy orientation. This orientation describes people who "interpret the environment" as "being supportive of their autonomy," and regulate their behavior "based on their interests and abiding values." (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The second causality orientation is the controlled orientation. People with this orientation "interpret environments as pressuring and coercive" and tend to be self-conscious (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Finally, people with an impersonal causality orientation are generally unintentional or unmotivated seeing "the environment as providing obstacles of desired outcomes."

However, according the self-determination theory, people in actuality have all three of the causality orientations with varying degrees with one causality orientation more dominant than the other two. Because of the shifting in causality orientations, the self-determination theory posits the social environments bring out "specific orientations regardless of the ongoing levels in the strengths of the three orientations" (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Autonomous and Controlling Motivations

Satisfied psychological needs, exposure to intrinsic, identified, and integrated regulation in social contexts, and a developed autonomous causality orientation facilitates the growth of what the self-determination theory calls autonomous motivation. Autonomous motivation "involves feeling a sense of choice and volition as a person fully endorses [their] own actions or decisions" and stems from doing something they find interesting or personally important (Moller et al, 2006). In contrast, dissatisfied psychological needs, exposure of external and introjected regulation, and a developed controlling or an amotivated causality orientation thwarts the growth of autonomous motivation and results in what the self-determination theory describes as controlling motivation. People motivated out of control "act because there is pressure to do so" and although they both make conscious decisions to act, their decision lacks "a true sense of choice and endorsement" (Moller et al, 2006).

Self-determination Theory and Public Policy

A majority of policies put in place to change behavior motivate people with external regulation (creating contingencies of reward or punishment) or through introjected regulation (stimulating self-esteem-based-contingencies). While controlling motivation is effective to a certain degree, there are many disadvantages.

First, coercive and controlling policies link to psychological ill-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Secondly, controlling policies tend to elicit defiance and resentment in people (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Ryan & Grolnick 1986). Moller et al., 2006 proposed controlling policy thwarts people's need for autonomy and therefore encourages people to "do the opposite of what the policy demands simply because policy demands it" (Moller et al., 2006). Third, controlling policies become ineffective over long periods of time (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The research suggests this is because externally regulated behaviors are "contingency dependent" and "show poor maintenance and transfer once contingencies are withdrawn" (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Similarly, policies driven out of introjected regulation are more likely maintained but still remain unstable and produce similar results of ineffectiveness overtime (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996). However, it is possible to support external regulation for extended periods of time but calls for using contingencies indefinitely and policing people's behavior. These methods are expensive and "inappropriate for most policy change (Moller, et al., 2006).

Research shows different outcomes for social contexts supporting autonomous motivation. Self-determination theory posits autonomous motivation results in maintained behavior change, effective performance, and psychological well-being through creating a social context "that supports choice, minimizes pressure and acknowledges and respects the others' viewpoints and feelings" (Moller et al., 2006). To do this effectively, several strategies are given but the basis for creating sound policy change is to promote autonomy support. Autonomy support "refrains from using pressure to manipulate people's experience or behavior" and instead helps people make decisions for themselves in a context that gives them structure and useful information (Moller et al., 2006).

Autonomy supported policy dialectically engages people to consider what is right and wrong. This lays a fertile ground for intrinsic motivation and well-interalized extrinsic motivation to grow because it "allows and encourages people to be guided by their own interests and values" (Moller et al., 2006).

Additionally, this mindful approach "facilitates full internalization and autonomous self-regulation" because people can make decisions with volition and endorsement. A surprising result of autonomy-supported policy people fully internalizing external regulations and making external monitoring and enforcement obsolete as behavior becomes self-regulated and harmonizes with the policy. This approach is both effective, inexpensive, and promotes well-being.

Conclusion

The self-determination theory consists of several key ideas. People have basic psychological needs for competency, relatedness to others, and for autonomy. These needs are satisfied through activities engaging people to become autonomously motivated and occur through several levels of social contexts, ranging from the interpersonal nature of causality orientations to the intrapersonal nature of informational, controlled and amotivational social contexts.

The result increases well-being and productivity but most importantly it creates a sense of awareness in an individual which encourages behavior change which helps designing systems in policy and government.

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