

Self-Determination Theory: The Importance of Autonomy to Well-Being Across Cultures

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According to proponents of self-determination theory, autonomous regulation is a universal psychological human need. Researchers have found autonomy (defined as acting in accordance with one's values) related to well-being across cultures. Encouraging client autonomy is therefore fundamental to the practice of humanistic counseling.

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With the growth of the multicultural movement, counselors have increasingly focused their attention on ethnic, racial, and cultural differences, tailoring their interventions to meet the unique needs of diverse groups (Thomas & Weinrach, 1999). Although counselors are ethically obligated to provide services that help clients make culturally appropriate decisions (Burn, 1992), this in no way diminishes the importance of individual differences or of universal psychological needs (Speight, Myers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991). Universal needs such as the need for safety or, as postulated by self-determination theory (SDT; Chirkov, Ryan, & Willness, 2005), the need for autonomy, are important across cultures. Researchers have found a relationship between autonomy and well-being in both Western and non-Western societies. Encouraging client autonomy is therefore fundamental to the practice of humanistic counseling, a practice which acknowledges "the responsibility of human beings for their own destiny, having within themselves the answers to improving their own lives" (Counseling Association for Humanistic Education and Development, n.d.). This article explores the current literature regarding the relationship between autonomy and well-being across diverse cultures.

AUTONOMY

According to the proponents of SDT, autonomy (along with relatedness and competence) is a basic human need that must be fulfilled for opti-

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mal functioning and subjective well-being (Chirkov et al., 2005). Ryan and Deci (2000), two leading proponents of SDT, have suggested that satisfying one's psychological needs, such as one's need for autonomy, is as essential to one's sense of well-being as satisfying one's need for nutrients. SDT researchers differentiate autonomous behaviors, which are internally motivated by a sense of volition, from controlled behaviors, which are externally motivated often through a sense of obligation, pressure, or anticipated rewards (Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005). *Autonomy*, defined by SDT researchers, literally means regulation by the self, or self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2006). By this definition, an individual who authentically endorses his or her actions and makes choices that reflect his or her true interests and values, whatever those interests and values are, is acting autonomously.

Terms closely related to the construct of autonomy, or autonomous regulation, include *self-determination*, *authenticity*, and *self-concordance*. Like autonomy, self-determined acts are acts that are in line with one's values and interests, independent of external pressure. "A person can be self-determined even when acting in accord with an external demand, provided the person fully concurs with or endorses doing so" (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1560). Similarly, authentic acts, according to Ekstrom (2005), come from one's core self and represent wholeheartedly endorsed preferences and values. In the same vein, self-concordant people pursue goals "because the goals fit with their underlying interests and values rather than because others say they should pursue them" (Sheldon et al., 2004, p. 209). To be autonomous, self-determined, authentic, or self-concordant implies at least the perception of freedom to act in accordance with one's internal values, independent of external controls.

WHAT AUTONOMY IS NOT

Autonomy, as defined by SDT researchers, is related to, but not the same as, independence, indeterminacy, or alternative choice. Acting autonomously does not require acting independent of external input but rather wholeheartedly endorsing one's actions (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). An autonomous act may be in the best interest of the individual or it may be in the best interest of the group; it may even seem to be self-sacrificing or to be the product of groupthink. As long as an act honestly reflects the values of the individual, it is an autonomous act. To act autonomously requires free will in the sense of the freedom of self-determination; it does not require true indeterminate free will, defined by Wilks (2003) as the ability to act independent of all antecedent psychological and physiological conditions. Similarly, acting autonomously does not require alternative choice. One can have many choices and not feel free to make a decision independent of external constraints, or one can have only one choice and fully endorse that choice (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In this review, as in SDT,

autonomy is not considered to be synonymous with independence, indeterminacy, or alternative choice.

WELL-BEING

In the fall 2008 edition of the *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Myers and Sweeney stated, "Professional counselors seek to encourage wellness, a positive state of well-being, through developmental, preventative, and wellness-enhancing interventions" (p. 482). What then is meant by wellness or well-being? Several complex, multidimensional models of wellness have been proposed; many of these models also view wellness as a single predictor variable (Harari, Waehler, & Rogers, 2005). Adams, Bezner, and Steinhart (1997) suggested wellness is how individuals perceive themselves functioning across multiple dimensions. For the purpose of this review, wellness or well-being is defined simply as a person's level of happiness as the person perceives it. Because of the different terminology used by different authors, the terms *wellness*, *well-being*, *subjective well-being*, and *psychological well-being* are used interchangeably throughout this article.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Researchers have studied the relationship between autonomy and well-being across diverse cultures, including Western and non-Western, individualist and collectivist, and vertical and horizontal societies (see Ryan & Deci, 2006). Societies considered relatively collectivistic versus individualistic or relatively vertical versus horizontal are based on Hofstede's (1997) ratings. Only studies defining autonomy and well-being in terms similar to those used in SDT are included in this review.

Studies Conducted in the United States

Many researchers have found a relationship between autonomy and well-being in the individualistic United States. For example, Huber (2003), using the Psychological Well-Being Scales (Ryff, 1989) to measure autonomy, and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and the Perceived Wellness Scale (Adams et al., 1997) to measure well-being, found autonomy positively related to well-being in students from two religiously affiliated colleges in Minnesota.

Bettencourt and Sheldon (2001), using feelings of authentic self-expression interchangeably with autonomy and feelings of autonomy, also found autonomy positively related to well-being. Bettencourt and Sheldon created their own scale to measure authentic self-expression and used the SWLS and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) to create a composite score for subjective well-being. Undergraduate participants from a large midwestern university completed these

measures, and from their analysis of the data, the researchers concluded that meeting one's need for authentic self-expression is positively associated with well-being.

To build upon their earlier research, Sheldon and Bettencourt (2002) conducted another study drawing on optimal distinctiveness theory and SDT. The researchers measured five need satisfaction constructs (including autonomy) exploring how these constructs are related to each other, as well as how each is related to positive affect, negative affect, motivation, and commitment. Introductory psychology students from the University of Missouri completed specifically tailored, nonstandardized questionnaires; an analysis of the data revealed a positive correlation between autonomy and well-being. More specifically, autonomy was found to be positively related to positive affect and negatively related to negative affect. Sheldon and Bettencourt concluded, "People may have a stronger need for a sense of choice and self-ownership than for a sense of distinctiveness or uniqueness" (p. 34).

These findings support the hypothesis that there is a relationship between autonomy and well-being in the United States. In a country like the United States, in which staunch individualism is rewarded, this may not be surprising. What about in more collectivist cultures? Is autonomy related to well-being in these societies as well?

Studies Conducted in Collectivist Countries

Theorists sometimes assume when people conform to the wishes of the group or follow the guidance of their parents, they are not acting autonomously (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Acting autonomously, however, does not require acting independent of social considerations but rather acting in accordance with one's values. As in the United States, researchers have found a relationship between autonomy and well-being in collectivist cultures.

To study the relationship between autonomy and well-being in China, Vansteenkiste et al. (2005) asked students ages 18 to 28 from the east and north-east regions of China to complete a series of questionnaires. These questionnaires included the PANAS, the SWLS, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977), and a modified version of the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Vansteenkiste et al. found a positive correlation between autonomy and well-being and a negative correlation between autonomy and depression. Through a set of regression analyses, the researchers also found the subcomponents of autonomous motivation and controlled motivation independently related to well-being, suggesting both a beneficial effect from autonomous motivation and a negative effect from controlled motivation. Vansteenkiste et al. concluded that although independence is central in individualistic societies and interdependence and conformity are central in collectivist ones, autonomy is important in both.

In a study conducted in Greece by Vleioras and Bosma (2005), university students completed the Greek translations of the Identity Style Inventory

(Berzonsky, 1992) and the Psychological Well-Being Scales. The researchers found significant positive correlations between autonomy and self-acceptance, autonomy and personal growth, autonomy and positive relations with others, and autonomy and purpose in life. Vleioras and Bosma concluded that, in terms of psychological well-being, it does not matter whether individuals seek answers independently or adopt the norms of their culture as long as they act in accordance with their values.

Studies conducted by researchers in Japan have also found a positive relationship between autonomy and well-being. In independent studies, Hayamizu (1997) and Yamauchi and Tanaka (1998) found that school-age children who scored lower on autonomy showed less motivation and lower well-being than did students who scored higher on autonomy.

Similar to their U.S. counterparts, these studies support SDT's claim of a relationship between autonomy and well-being. It seems one can act autonomously in accordance with collectivist values and still reap the benefits of enhanced well-being.

Cross-Cultural Studies

As in the aforementioned studies, cross-cultural research has also supported the relationship between autonomy and well-being. Sheldon et al. (2004), for example, conducted a study exploring whether self-reported self-concordant individuals would report a greater sense of well-being in both the individualistic United States and in the collectivistic countries of China, South Korea, and Taiwan. The researchers also examined the cultural mean differences in self-concordance among these four countries. College students from four large universities (one in each country) each listed eight personal strivings and rated the extent to which they pursued each striving for external versus intrinsic reasons. Sheldon et al. used this information to establish a composite autonomy score for each participant. Each participant's autonomy score was then compared with his or her composite subjective well-being score, which was based on the participant's responses on the PANAS and the SWLS. The researchers found that self-reported self-concordance related to subjective well-being in each culture. In addition, the researchers found that mean levels of self-concordance were positive in each sample, indicating that individuals, on average, felt more autonomous than controlled in each culture. The mean levels of self-concordance were approximately equal in the U.S., Chinese, and South Korean samples but were lower in the Taiwanese sample. The researchers explained that self-concordance may be lower in the Taiwanese sample because the university and the city within which it is located are fairly traditional and possibly more collectivistic than are the other cities in the study. Sheldon et al. (2004) concluded, "'Owning one's actions'—that is feeling that one's goals are consistent with the self—may be important for most if not all humans" (p. 209).

Hahn and Oishi (2005), noting that the previous researchers made comparisons only between college student samples, designed a study to test the universality of SDT. They did this by exploring 10 psychological needs and their relationships to well-being in both younger (recruited from colleges) and older (recruited from community centers and churches) South Koreans and Americans. Participants from Minneapolis and Seoul each filled out a need-satisfaction questionnaire in which they recalled their most satisfying event over the past month and rated 30 descriptive statements, on a scale of 1 to 5, identifying the importance of each of the 10 psychological needs in relation to that event. Participants also completed the PANAS to measure their experience of positive and negative affect during the specified event. Across the sample as a whole, Hahn and Oishi found that autonomy ranked second in its perceived importance to well-being and autonomy alone significantly predicted positive affect. The researchers found significant cultural differences in the mean levels of autonomy, indicating that American participants perceived autonomy as more salient than did Korean participants. They also found significant age differences in the relative importance of autonomy, indicating that older participants perceived relatedness as more salient than autonomy and that younger participants perceived autonomy as more salient than relatedness, in both the American and Korean samples. In all four samples, however, individuals, on average, who perceived themselves as more autonomous also reported a greater sense of well-being.

Chirkov et al. (2003) took cross-cultural research further by studying the relationship between autonomy and well-being not only in individualist versus collectivist cultures but also in vertical versus horizontal (i.e., equal vs. hierarchical) social orientations. Chirkov et al. (2003) postulated that horizontal orientations are enacted more autonomously than are vertical ones because they are more easily internalized. Chirkov et al. (2003) used the terms *autonomy* and *internalization* interchangeably, stating that autonomy is really the internalization of one's cultural norms. The researchers assessed levels of internalization and explored the relationship between internalization and well-being in university students from the United States, Russia, Turkey, and South Korea. Their analysis of the data revealed a clear relationship between autonomy and well-being across cultures. They also found that horizontal practices were more internalized, were enacted more autonomously, and resulted in greater well-being compared with vertical ones. Chirkov et al. (2003) concluded, "Whether one's behavior and attitudes are individualistic, collectivistic, horizontal, or vertical in nature, more autonomous enactment is associated with greater well-being" (p. 106).

To replicate the results of the aforementioned study and broaden the scope of cross-cultural research, Chirkov et al. (2005) conducted a similar study with Canadian and Brazilian university students. Participants completed questionnaires similar to those used in the previous study, and the researchers again found greater levels of autonomy associated with greater levels of

psychological well-being. In this study, these relationships were shown to be somewhat stronger in the Canadian sample (a more individualistic and horizontal culture) than in the Brazilian sample, whereas no moderation by country had been found in the previous study. Again, vertical practices were found to be less internalized than horizontal ones and horizontal practices were found to be associated with more positive well-being.

Opposing Research

Researchers who dispute the relationship between autonomy and well-being often define autonomy in terms of acting without external input rather than acting on the basis of self-endorsement. Studies in which autonomy is defined in this way are not included in this review. The following study by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) is included, however, because it is widely cited as indicating that autonomy is not important to Asian American children (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Although this study focused on functionality in terms of motivation and performance rather than well-being directly, it is considered by some to refute the claim that autonomy is a universal psychological human need.

Iyengar and Lepper (1999) studied 52 Asian American and 53 Anglo American third- through fifth-grade students enrolled in two different schools in San Francisco (each with roughly a 55% Anglo American and 40% Asian American population). Each student attended an individual experimental session in which he or she was asked to work on solving a set of anagrams. Each student was assigned a personal choice condition, an experimenter choice condition, or a mom choice condition. In the personal choice condition, the child chose the anagram(s) he or she wanted to work on and the color pen that he or she wanted to use; in the experimenter choice condition, the experimenter chose the anagram(s) and the pen color; and in the mom choice condition, the experimenter made it seem as though the participant's mother had chosen the anagram(s) and the pen color. The researchers found both the Anglo American and Asian American children performed better in the personal choice condition than in the experimenter choice condition (as measured by the total number of correctly solved anagrams). Compared with the Anglo American children, the Asian American children were actually more engaged and performed best (and appeared to enjoy the task the most) in the mom choice condition. The researchers concluded that Asian American children may sometimes prefer to have choices made for them by significant others.

Although Ryan and Deci (2006) did not contest the results of this study, they questioned the conclusions drawn from it, pointing out that both groups did far worse in the experimenter choice condition than in either of the other two conditions. To conclude from this study that autonomy is not important for Asian American students, Ryan and Deci (2006) said, is to assume that Asian American students do not autonomously follow their

mothers' choices. Developmental factors should also be considered when drawing conclusions from this study.

DISCUSSION

Although not everyone agrees, the literature seems to support that "across diverse cultures, the issue of autonomy can be similarly understood and, across diverse cultures, autonomy is associated with well-being" (Chirkov et al., 2003, p. 108). In their review of the literature, as in mine, Ryan and Deci (2006) did not find any studies that, when the constructs were defined as stated in the introduction to this article, did not support the claim that autonomy is a universal psychological human need or that refuted the claim that autonomy is related to well-being across cultures. Differences in mean levels of autonomy and variations in the relative importance of autonomy across cultures may exist, but the developmental pathways toward autonomy are similar (Helwig, 2006).

Implications for Counseling

According to the research, regardless of whether a person lives in an individualistic versus collectivistic, or vertical versus horizontal society, if that person acts autonomously, in accordance with his or her values, he or she is likely to experience a greater sense of well-being. Acting autonomously, however, is not always easy or obvious. Individuals may be so driven by extrinsic rewards or by relief from external pressures that they make decisions that do not reflect their true values, thus diminishing their overall sense of happiness (Kasser, 2003). Counselors may be able to help clients improve their sense of well-being by encouraging them to identify and explore their values. Recognizing a discord between their values and behaviors may be enough to prompt client change, either in attitude or behavior, thus reducing their distress and improving their sense of well-being.

A client, Bob, for example, may arrive at work every morning feeling agitated. This may affect his work performance, causing him to fear losing his job. Upon reflection, Bob may realize he feels fine when he leaves the house, but, feeling pressured to prove himself by getting to work before his boss, gets unreasonably frustrated with people in line in front of him at the local coffee shop, where he stops on his way to work. Understanding this, Bob may choose to change his behavior by leaving the house a little earlier or by finding a new coffee shop that is less busy. Alternatively, Bob may decide he cannot leave for work any earlier, but that the coffee from this particular shop is the best thing about his day. He may decide he values this cup of coffee more than arriving ahead of his boss. Knowing what he truly values and feeling free to act in accordance with those values, Bob is less likely to arrive at work feeling agitated and is more likely to experience a sense of well-being throughout the day. This may even help Bob improve his job performance and decrease his chances of losing his job.

Although counselors can be effective in empowering clients to make informed, personally autonomous decisions, counselors can also, advertently or inadvertently, undermine this process by imposing their own values on their clients. "To optimally regard the issues of self-determination and cultural autonomy, the ethical counselor works from a schema of self-awareness and scrutinizes the personal biases that might interfere with the delivery of acute and empowering cross-cultural interventions" (Burn, 1992, p. 581). When counselors act as facilitators rather than as experts, they may better support the autonomous functioning of their clients.

Limitations

Certain limitations regarding the studies included in this review should be noted. First, most of the studies reviewed were correlational studies and do not demonstrate causality or show changes over time. Also, many of the participants were self-selected, which can lead to systematic bias; most of the data are based on self-reports, which may contain inaccuracies; and participants in these studies were primarily college students, which must be taken into account when considering the generalizability of the results (e.g., autonomy may have a stronger relationship to well-being among the more educated portions of a population). In addition, of the hundreds of relatively distinct cultures in the world, only a few are represented.

The primary limitation of this review is its fairly narrow focus. Other than the study by Iyengar and Lepper (1999), only studies in which autonomy is defined in terms similar to those used in SDT are included in this review. A more in-depth review of studies, in which autonomy is defined in other ways, would add a level of intricacy and erudition to this review.

Implications for Future Research

To further the research and improve generalizability, future researchers should consider studying additional cultures and casting a wider demographic net, including participants from nonmetropolitan areas, those with less education, and those with a wider range of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Longitudinal studies, to look at changes over time, and data collection from more than one source would also add significantly to this body of research. Additional studies considering the differences in mean levels of autonomy and variations in the relative importance of autonomy across cultures could also prove interesting.

Although more research is needed before the universality of autonomy as a psychological human need can be claimed, a growing body of literature suggests that autonomy, when accurately defined, is essential to full functioning and mental health across cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2006). It is important, therefore, for humanistic counselors to encourage autonomy in their clients from all cultural backgrounds.

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