

Article 70

Basic Needs and Well-Being: A Self-Determination Theory View

Martin Lynch

Lynch, Martin F., is an Assistant Professor at the Warner School of Education and Human Development at the University of Rochester. His research focuses on the effects of social context on human motivation, self-concept and personality development, and well being.

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000b) suggests that, to the extent that social contexts support a person's *basic psychological needs* for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they facilitate greater well-being and vitality. *Autonomy* refers to the experience of behaving in accord with one's own interests or values (Ryan, 1993) and it is supported by non-controlling, supportive relationships. *Competence* is a propensity toward mastery and effectance in one's environment, and is facilitated by conditions that provide optimal challenges and positive feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Deci, 1975). Finally, *relatedness* refers to a propensity toward connectedness or belongingness with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985), and is fostered when others treat one in warm and caring ways (Reis & Franks, 1994; Ryan, La Guardia, Butzel, Kim, & Chirkov, 2003). Understanding the role of basic psychological needs can provide a useful framework for counselors, both in case conceptualization and in designing treatment interventions (Lynch & Levers, 2007), but questions remain about the universality of the needs posited by SDT. The present paper reports on one study that has examined the role of these needs across three cultures: China, Russia, and the United States.

Evidence from Western countries, in particular the United States, provides considerable support for the SDT concept of basic needs (see Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b for reviews). For example, La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman and Deci (2000) showed that when young adults experienced need satisfaction within specific relationships, they reported having better relationships. That is, people reported more security, satisfaction, and well-being within relationships that were need supportive. Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe and Ryan (2000) showed that changes in daily well-being were associated with fluctuations in basic psychological need satisfaction.

Testing the SDT model in a cross-cultural context, however, is controversial, because some theorists have questioned whether SDT's conceptualization of basic psychological needs, particularly the need for autonomy, has universal significance (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). SDT specifically suggests that autonomy is an essential need for psychological growth and well-being regardless of cultural backdrops and values. This contrasts with a relativist view that 'psychological needs' are socially constructed rather than universal. According to the relativist view, autonomy is important primarily in

western, individualist contexts, but should not matter to people in eastern or collectivist societies, where ‘autonomy’ may not explicitly be valued (Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Miller, 1997; Oishi & Diener, 2001).

Despite this controversy, several studies have provided initial support for the importance of autonomy and autonomy-support across a number of cultures. Chirkov and Ryan (2001), for example, found that the experience of autonomy support by parents and teachers was positively related to well-being and academic motivation among high school students in both Russia and the United States. Deci et al. (2001) showed how autonomy-support from a supervisor affected general well-being in both a collectivist state-owned and a western market organization. Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan (2003) found that more autonomous internalization of cultural practices was related to greater well-being among participants in four cultures (South Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the United States). The study reported here extends this literature by looking at how experiencing six relationship partners as autonomy supportive (rather than controlling) is associated with relationship satisfaction and with general well-being in three different cultures: China, Russia, and the United States.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants are 642 college students drawn from 3 nations: 205 from a university in the northeastern United States, 192 from a university in European Russia, and 245 from a university in the Shandong region in China. Participants completed measures in small groups (<15 students) over the course of two sessions, one week apart from each other.

Measures: Session 1

Personal well-being. A variety of indicators assessed general, personal well-being, including: (a) a scale to assess depressive symptoms; (b) a scale to assess trait anxiety; (c) a scale to assess physical symptoms; (d) the Satisfaction with Life Scale; (e) a measure of positive and negative affect; and (f) the Subjective Vitality Scale which assesses feelings of physical and mental aliveness and vigor.

Two general well-being scores were derived from these 7 instruments: *positive well-being* (PWB), consisting of the Positive Affect, Life Satisfaction, and Subjective Vitality scales; and *negative well-being* (NWB), consisting of the Negative Affect, Depression, Anxiety, and Physical Symptoms scales.

Measures: Session 2

Measures in Session 2 focused on variations across six target relationships: mother, father, best friend, romantic partner, roommate, and a selected teacher. Each relationship was presented in a separate section of the survey, and the order in which relationships were presented was counterbalanced across participants using a Latin square design.

Autonomy support. Participants rated the autonomy supportiveness of each relationship using the 6-item Autonomy Supportive Relationships (ASR) scale. Sample items include: “I feel controlled by my _____” (R) and “_____ listens to my thoughts and ideas.” The mean of the six items represents the ASR score for that relationship.

Relational well-being. Cross, Gore, and Morris (2003) suggested that, when conducting cross-cultural research, it is important to assess well-being at the level of one's relationships in addition to general, personal well-being. This is because of the importance that collectivist societies presumably place upon relationships and group processes. The present study assessed both satisfaction and vitality at the relationship-specific level as measures of relational well-being. Satisfaction was derived from ratings on a 7-point scale of the item "How satisfied you are in your relationship with [name of partner]?" Relationship-specific vitality was assessed with the previously described Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan & Bernstein, in press; Ryan & Frederick, 1997), which was completed for the vitality felt when with each target person (with mother, father, and so on). For the tests reported here, a composite index called Relational Well-Being (RWB) will be used, calculated by standardizing and summing the vitality and satisfaction scores across relationships.

Results

First examined was the degree to which participants' experience of autonomy support varied across relationships. It did, as demonstrated by an analysis of variance [ANOVA, for United States: $F(5, 435) = 18.84, p < .001$; for Russia: $F(5, 420) = 41.35, p < .001$; for China: $F(5, 345) = 7.54, p < .001$]. Yet in all three countries, participants similarly ranked their relationships with their best friend as the most autonomy supportive relationship and relationships with their teacher as the least autonomy supportive.

Using regression analysis, the contribution of autonomy support to both personal well-being (positive, and negative) and relational well-being was tested. In all three countries, when participants experienced their relationship partners as more autonomy supportive, they were more likely to experience both personal well-being and relational well-being (see Table 1).

Table 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the impact of autonomy support on well-being in China, Russia, and the United States

	China			Russia			United States		
	PWB	NWB	RWB	PWB	NWB	RWB	PWB	NWB	RWB
ASR	.33***	-.34***	.35***	.27***	-0.08	.50***	.41***	-.40***	.57***

Note. ASR = autonomy supportive relationships; PWB = positive well-being; NWB = negative well-being; RWB = relational well-being. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

These results suggest that autonomy support as a quality of the social context (specifically, of interpersonal relationships) is important to people from three quite

different cultures: China, Russia, and the United States. Although some have suggested that autonomy should matter only to people who live in cultures where autonomy is explicitly valued, based on the present results it does not seem to be the case that support for autonomy matters significantly less for people from a collectivist society (China) than it does for those from an individualist (United States) or mixed (Russia) culture. In fact, although it was not reported here, the present study also measured the degree to which participants from each country viewed themselves as highly independent versus highly interdependent; results from analyses found that autonomy support was important not only for people who rated themselves as highly independent, but also for those who considered themselves to be highly interdependent, in all three countries.

Autonomy support is something that our social partners, our social context, can supply to us, or deny us. The impact of autonomy support on well-being and performance has been studied in the United States and Canada in a number of settings, including in the classroom in terms of how teachers interact with their students, in sports in terms of how coaches interact with their athletes, in psychotherapy in terms of how the therapist interacts with the client (as well as in clinical trials testing the importance of autonomy support in facilitating motivation for treatment among, for example, smokers who are attempting to quit), in organizations in terms of how supervisors interact with their employees, and in terms of parenting styles and the way parents interact with their children. It is therefore clearly important to specify behaviorally how people can support each other's autonomy. Research (see Reeve et al., 1999) has in fact identified a number of autonomy-supportive behaviors that can be put into practice in virtually any setting: in order to be autonomy-supportive, one can (1) convey understanding of the other person's point of view; (2) encourage the other person to take initiative; (3) provide the other person with meaningful choices; (4) acknowledge the other person's wishes and preferences; and (5) in general, refrain from trying to control the other person.

For counselors, familiarity with the concept of basic psychological needs, as described herein and in self-determination theory, can assist both in case conceptualization and in devising intervention strategies (Lynch & Levers, 2007). Specifically, given the association between need satisfaction and well-being that this and other studies have demonstrated, it is possible that some problems with which clients struggle have roots in relationships and environments that do not allow them sufficient opportunity to satisfy one or another of their basic psychological needs (for competence, relatedness, or autonomy). Accordingly, once client and counselor have identified a deficiency in need satisfaction as contributing to the client's current problems, they can discuss strategies to help the client seek out opportunities to develop meaningful relationships, to challenge themselves and receive competence feedback, or to become more choiceful (more self-determined or autonomous) in their daily activities. Based on these strategies and an understanding of how the needs work, counselor and client can together develop small 'experiments' to allow the client to try out a new behavior related to one of these basic psychological needs, and discuss the clients' success at their next session. An important point here is that SDT recognizes that, although the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy is claimed to be universal, the way in which the needs are satisfied may differ from culture to culture, and indeed from person to person.

A final point is that an understanding of basic psychological needs can inform the counselor's way of being with the client. Knowing, for example, that creating

opportunities for choice and providing a meaningful rationale when choice is not possible (providing support for autonomy, in other words) is important for internalization and for well-being, counselors can strive to be more autonomy supportive and less controlling with their clients. In other words, familiarity with the concept of basic psychological needs can inform not only the content, but the process of counseling.

Much work is still needed in order to understand the role of basic psychological needs in human well-being. The application to the counseling relationship is only beginning to be explored. The results of the present study suggest that there may be value in studying the impact of implementing autonomy supportive practices in various life-domains – in the classroom, in organizational settings, in sports, and importantly in counseling – in countries and cultures other than the United States.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497-529.
- Chirkov, V. I., & Ryan, R. M. (2001). Parent and teacher autonomy-support in Russian and U. S. adolescents: Common effects on well-being and academic motivation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32, 618-635.
- Chirkov, V. I., Ryan, R. M., Kim, Y., & Kaplan, U. (2003). Differentiating autonomy from individualism and independence: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization of cultural orientations and well-being. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 84, 97-109.
- Cross, S. E., Gore, J. S., & Morris, M. L. (2003). The relational-interdependent self-construal, self-concept consistency, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 933-944.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Deci, E. L. (1975). *Intrinsic motivation*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 227-268.
- Deci, E. L., Ryan, R. M., Gagne, M., Leone, D. R., Usunov, J., & Kornazheva, B. P. (2001). Need satisfaction, motivation, and well-being in the work organizations of a former Eastern bloc country. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 930-942.
- La Guardia, J. G., Ryan, R. M., Couchman, C. E., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Within-person variation in security of attachment: A self-determination theory perspective on attachment, need fulfillment, and well-being. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 79, 367-384.
- Lynch, M. F., & Levers, L. L. (2007). Ecological-transactional and motivational perspectives in counseling. In J. Gregoire & C. Jungers (Eds.), *The counselor's companion: What every beginning counselor needs to know* (pp. 586-605). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Markus, H. R., Kitayama, S., & Heiman, R. J. (1996). Culture and "basic" psychological principles. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 857-913). New York: Guilford Press.
- Miller, J. G. (1997). Cultural conceptions of duty: Implications for motivation and morality. In D. Munro, J. F. Schumaker & A. C. Carr (Eds.), *Motivation and culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Oishi, S., & Diener, E. (2001). Goals, culture, and subjective well-being. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 1674-1682.
- Reeve, J., Bolt, E., & Cai, Y. (1999). Autonomy-supportive teachers: How they teach and motivate students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91, 537-548.
- Reis, H. T., & Franks, P. (1994). The role of intimacy and social support in health outcomes: Two processes or one? *Parental Relationships*, 2, 185-197.
- Reis, H. T., Sheldon, K. M., Gable, S. L., Roscoe, J., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). Daily well-being: The role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 419-435.
- Ryan, R. M. (1993). Agency and organization: Intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and the self in psychological development. In J. E. Jacobs (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Developmental perspectives on motivation* (Vol. 40, pp. 1-56). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ryan, R. M., & Bernstein, J. H. (in press). Vitality/Zest/Enthusiasm/Vigor/Energy. In C. Petersen (Ed.), *Values in action: Classification of strengths*. Washington, DC: APA Books.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000a). The darker and brighter sides of human existence: Basic psychological needs as a unifying concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 319-338.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000b). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Frederick, C. (1997). On energy, personality, and health: Subjective vitality as a dynamic reflection of well-being. *Journal of Personality*, 65, 529-565.
- Ryan, R. M., La Guardia, J. G., Butzel, J. S., Kim, Y., & Chirkov, V. (2003). *Emotional reliance across gender, relationships, and cultures: The self-determination of dependence*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Rochester.

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm