

Running head: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

How Self-Determination Theory Informs Teachers

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What motivates our actions? Behaviorists like B. F. Skinner and Pavlov asserted that our actions are spurred by external factors in our environment. In essence, they claimed that we don't *act* but constantly *react* to these external influences. According to this theory, when our actions are rewarded, we will continue them. When our actions are punished in some way, we will diminish them.

The evolution of cognitive theory was a response to behaviorism's narrow view of the mind. According to cognitive theories, rather than acting because their behavior has been reinforced or punished, people rely on such processes as memory, attention, and perception to evaluate contexts and tasks. This thought leads to and enables conscious action as opposed to reflexive action. More recently, socio-cultural theories of learning introduced the notion that social and cultural factors can be powerful determinants of behavior. Although there remains much evidence of behaviorist practices in schools today, it is widely accepted that cognitive processes strongly influence motivated actions and that these actions occur in a setting where societal and cultural practices are important influences.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

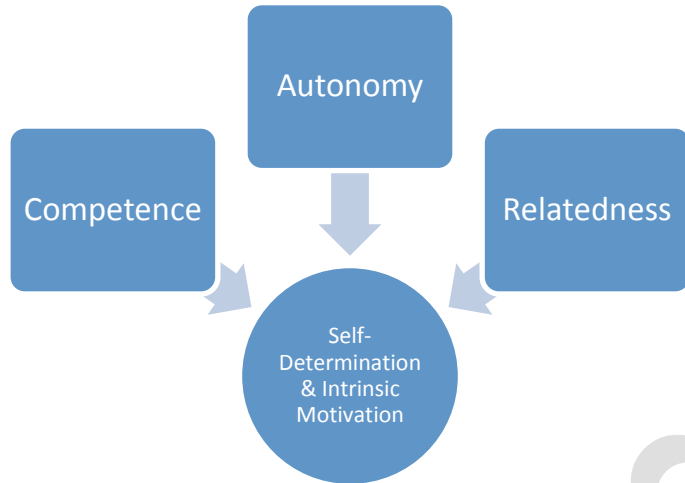
Self-determination theory is one that recognizes both the power of human cognition in behavior as well as the strong influence of social and cultural factors in the environment. The theory states that a self-determined individual is confident, competent and in control. Self-determined people are intrinsically motivated to pursue their own interests but also to act in ways that enable them to function effectively with others in their social environment. Studies have shown that self-determined people live in a state of overall well-being and handle challenge and failure positively.

Consider Caitlin. She is a sixth-grader who just started middle school. Caitlin was a good student throughout elementary school and participated in chorus and in Girl Scouts outside of school. Since Caitlin enjoys all things “nature”, Girl Scouts provided her with many, varied enjoyable activities. She has a small group of close-knit friends who are attending the same new school. She was excited to enter sixth-grade and insisted that her mother take her to the store a month before school to purchase supplies. She came to school on the first day highly organized with a notebook for each class and a printed schedule. By the end of the first day, Caitlin was pleased to learn that her science and math teachers would coteach a longer instructional block where the students would explore ecosystems, which included the local estuary. According to SDT, Caitlin demonstrates the classic characteristics of someone who is self-determined. Caitlin perceives herself to be capable and in control of her learning environment. She approaches school with enthusiasm, confidence and motivation.

Basic Needs

How did Caitlin become self-determined? SDT tells us that the environment is a critical factor in the development of self-determination and that this environment must support three fundamental human needs. (See Figure 1.) First, people need *autonomy*. That is, they need a strong sense of ownership. They need to have at least some level of control within their setting over what happens to them. This means they sometimes make choices for themselves. At other times, they are influenced by external factors but willingly participate because they understand the importance or value of a behavior.

Figure 1. The Three Basic Human Needs that Lead to Self-Determination



Second, individuals need to feel a strong sense of their own *competence*. The perception that one is capable bolsters people when they face challenge or failure. A sense of competence leads to initiative and persistence. The third need theorized to support self-determination is called *relatedness*. This refers to the importance of having social relationships in the setting that are nurturing and supportive. When trust develops, people feel safe to take risks. SDT suggests that Caitlin has been in an environment where she has felt autonomous, competent and related to others.

The three basic needs provide a highly useful framework for viewing a classroom setting. An environment that ensures that the needs are met is conducive to self-determination. An environment that is not supportive of the needs will thwart self-determination.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

We all learned about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in Psychology 101. Recall that intrinsic motivation comes from within and reflects the things we find personally interesting or important. Extrinsic motivation occurs when our actions are controlled or encouraged by external forces such as a reward or the threat of a punishment. Within SDT, there is a more

current conceptualization of classic intrinsic and extrinsic motivation using an “autonomy continuum”. It shows two extremes – amotivation (the absence of any intention to engage in a behavior) and intrinsic motivation (the classic inherent propensity to choose to engage).

Between the extremes, the theory suggests varying levels of extrinsic control. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2. The Self-Determination Autonomy Continuum

	AMOTIVATION	EXTERNAL REGULATION	INTROJECTED REGULATION	IDENTIFIED REGULATION	INTEGRATED REGULATION	INTRINSIC MOTIVATION
Reader’s Decision	“I will not read.”	“I will read for exactly 15 minutes after school because I can’t go out to play until I do.”	“I will read for 15 minutes after school because my teacher will be disappointed in me if I don’t.”	“I will read this book on electricity because it has information that I need to write my science report.”	“I will read this book about videogames because playing videogames is my hobby and I read all the books I can find on video games so that I can be a better player.”	“I love to read and I will read this book right now even if it makes me late for school!”
Explanation		Reading is done only due to external influence. When the external influence is removed, reading terminates.		Reading is a vehicle to some other valued outcome. As long as the outcome is valued, reading continues.		Reading is done for the sake of reading.

External regulation occurs when someone expects a tangible reward or is threatened with punishment for engagement in a behavior. The individual is highly controlled in this scenario because they will not engage except for the external pressure. A bit less, but still controlling is *introjected regulation*. In this case, the individual feels pressure from a significant other person. They engage out of guilt or to avoid shame. At the next point on the continuum, *identified regulation*, the individual begins to take some control although he is still influenced by external pressure. The person begins to recognize that the task may be instrumental or important and so is willing to engage. The next point on the continuum is *integrated regulation*. In this case, an individual fully acknowledges the value or importance of the task and chooses to engage. The main difference between this and intrinsic motivation is that when integrated, the individual does

the task in order to accomplish some other objective. When intrinsically motivated, on the other hand, it is the task itself that is the reason for the action.

Internalization

Intrinsic motivation is closely related to self-determination. Self-determined individuals frequently engage in behaviors strictly for internal reasons. Even if they are not intrinsically motivated, however, self-determined individuals will engage in behaviors that they understand to be important or valuable. When an individual “buys in” and willingly engages in an activity that is not intrinsically motivating, self-determination theorists say that their motivation has been *internalized*. This process is closely tied to the need for relatedness, discussed previously. That is, internalization, or the movement toward willing engagement in an uninteresting or unimportant task, is facilitated by trusted individuals in the setting. For example, a teacher might say to her fifth-graders, “OK, I know you don’t want to do this weekly writing task but it is an assessment required by the county so they can measure your progress. We will spend just 15 minutes on it and then we will get back to Writers’ Workshop and the stories you started yesterday.” In this example, a trusted individual - the teacher - provides students with a rationale that helps them to at least see the purpose of the activity. They are more likely to do it willingly knowing that it is important, that it won’t be long before they can return to their personally relevant work, and that the teacher recognizes and respects their viewpoint.

The concept of internalization is essential in educational settings. There are often activities that students will not want to do in school. SDT indicates that in these cases, parents and teachers play an important role by modeling the behavior, providing a rationale for its importance, and recognizing students’ perspective.

Summary

To summarize, SDT provides a helpful way to understand student behavior in school. Additionally, the theory provides guidelines for creating a classroom environment that will enhance students' intrinsic motivation and self-determination. This environment must meet students' basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, the environment is conducive to the development of self-determination and intrinsic motivation. In situations where self-determined individuals are not intrinsically motivated, they will often engage anyway as a result of internalization, the process where individuals will begin to identify with a behavior enough to engage willingly.

SDT also helps to explain why it is a misconception to think that we can *motivate students*. Rather, we should be trying to create a classroom environment where students will *find their own motivation*. After all, this is the essence of intrinsic motivation. It comes from within. No one can give it to you or force it upon you. More appropriately, teachers should try to create an autonomy-supportive environment that provides students with competence and supportive relationships.

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