# ALTERNATIVES AND LIMITATIONS OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY: PERSPECTIVES OF DIFFERENT LITERATURE

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# INTRODUCTION

Deci and Ryan proposed self-determination theory in 1985. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) describe SDT as a macro-theory that considers human motivation, feelings, and improvement. Figure 1 illustrates the major components of the theory.



**Figure 1: The self-determination continuum showing types of motivation with their regulatory styles, loci of causality and corresponding processes (Adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72).**

To the left end of the spectrum is amotivation**,** in which an individual is completely non- autonomous. In the middle, there are several levels of extrinsic motivation: external regulation in which motivation is entirely external and regulated by compliance, conformity and external rewards and punishments; introjected regulation, in which the motivation is somewhat external and is driven by self-control, efforts to protect the ego and internal rewards and punishments; in identified regulation, the motivation is somewhat internal and based on conscious values and that which is personally important to the individual; and integrated regulation, in which the individual is beginning to be motivated by intrinsic sources. The right end of the continuum shows an individual totally motivated by intrinsic sources. In intrinsic regulation, the individual is self-motivated and self-determined, and driven by interest, enjoyment, and the satisfaction inherent in the behaviour or activity they engage in.

The following research questions were designed to guide the review of literature:

1. What are the alternatives to Self-determination theory?
2. What are the limitations of Self-determination theory?

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# METHODOLOGY

This literature review mainly focused on research articles and books that investigated the SDT alternatives and limitations. Most of the reviewed literature were published in online journals. The selected articles and books were read, and the information was tabulated according to the research questions (SDT alternatives and limitations) of the study. The data analysis was done using the thematic analysis.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

# SDT ALTERNATIVES

Deci and Ryan (2000) emphasized that SDT differs from other needs theories in two ways: it identifies needs as inherent and it highlights how needs are linked to an increase in psychological development, internalisation and well-being. Needs, in SDT, are considered as inherent basic tendencies that are common to everyone (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). McClelland (1985), in his acquired needs theory, identified the need for success, authority and relationship. From McClelland’s perspective, individuals vary in the way they present and control their needs. However, in SDT, each need can be seen in everyone, and all the needs are similarly important.

Hull (1943) and Murray (1938) presented two theories of needs that are considered as macro theories of motivation. According to Hull, inherent needs such as food, sex, and water, are centred in non-nervous-system tissue deficits, and those needs push human beings to action. According to Murray, needs are at the psychological level more than the physiological level. He viewed them mainly as necessary rather than intrinsic. As hypothesised by Murray, anything that moves one to act is a need. Deci and Ryan (2000) believed even though motives may energise acts, they are not needs from Hullian or SDT perspectives. Deci and Ryan’s SDT definition of needs is consistent with Hullian thought and with Murray’s person logic approach.

Motive Disposition Theory (MDT) is based on Murray’s (1938) theory, and was later expanded by McClelland (1985), and Atkinson (1982). Atkinson (1982) states that MDT research mainly centres on a persons’ dissimilarities in motives and their consequences in a variety of outcomes and behaviours. Although MDT and SDT seem apparently mismatched, a close examination reveals they address two sides of the same phenomena.

It is important to note that SDT differs from Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs theory. In Maslow’s theory, needs higher in the hierarchy become more stimulated when needs at the base are fulfilled. However, SDT research is likely to focus on need fulfilment rather than needs power. While some needs theories’ focal point is on the strength of needs (McClelland, 1985; Murray, 1938), SDT considers the satisfaction of needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT also distinguishes ‘needs’ from ‘desires’ (Deci & Ryan, 2000). From the SDT perspective, desires, that is, power, money and status cannot be considered as ‘needs.

Vallerand (2000) presented a hierarchical model of motivation. It included the varied ways of motivation at three levels of generalisation: how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are related, determinants and outcomes of those levels. Vallerand (2000) argues that there is a lot of conformity between SDT and hierarchical models of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. However, there are some areas where the two models vary. The hierarchical structure of a model tries to introduce new motivational processes. According to the hierarchical model, interactions exist between the levels of motivation but SDT does not consider the matter of the interaction between the different levels of motivation. In SDT, there are two motivational orientations at causality-orientation and the domain specific levels, but it does not indicate the interaction of those motivational orientations.

Attachment theory has conventionally stressed that individuals’ attachment patterns are enhanced in connection to primary caregivers, while SDT focuses more on the direct social context (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In relation to goal theories, learning goals and task involvement are associated with intrinsic motivation. But performance goals and ego involvement are not aligned properly with extrinsic motivation. However, according to SDT there is a full assembling of extrinsic motivations that vary significantly in their link to self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, as discussed above, SDT is clearly different from other needs theories.

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# SDT LIMITATIONS

When considering the limitations of SDT, most researchers have focused mainly on autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Vallerand, 1997). Vallerand, Guay, and Blanchard (2000) support SDT and reveal that these two types of needs are often the main cause of motivation. However, the role of relatedness is not so essential in the motivational progression in SDT although relatedness can play a key role in motivation. This is more so if individuals are involved in social works.

Deci and Ryan (2000) note that SDT might not be able to identify the individual differences in the basic psychological needs. However, an examination of the individual differences in psychological needs is worthwhile as it might facilitate better motivational processes. Broeck, Ferris, Chang, and Rosen (2006), in their review of SDT, considered that those three needs generally represent the main criteria for basic psychological needs. Nevertheless, they found that further wide-ranging research is needed in organisational settings.

SDT research does not reveal a heavy focus on adolescents. Therefore, adolescents’ perceptions about basic psychological needs satisfaction should be researched further (Leversen, Danielsen, Birkeland, & Samdal, 2012). Leversen et al. (2012) found that in the leisure activity background, among the three psychological needs, competence and relatedness fulfilment are likely to be the most significant for adolescents’ life satisfaction. Further, they stated that the relationship between autonomy and life satisfaction did not remain substantial. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) did not consider ‘autonomy’, and it only considered the concept of competence out of the three-basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Veronneau, Koestner, and Abela (2005) emphasised that competence is the most significant psychological needs during middle childhood as well as in early adolescence. However, literature (Which literature? Give references) indicates that, during their transition periods, adolescents need to feel more autonomous (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993). White (1963) exposed that competence is a basic human tendency that lies behind self-esteem and self- confidence. According to Bandura (1989), no genuine place exists for autonomy in a health agency theory. Hilgard (1987) almost disregarded the research based on intrinsic motivation and did not identify motivation as a separate area in psychology.

Needs theorists are divided in their views on SDT. Whether needs are internal or external is also a divisive issue (Leversen et al., 2012). Under SDT, there is an assumption that the fundamental structure of human needs can be seen throughout the process of human development (Deci & Ryan, 2008). However, there is disagreement as to whether these needs are few or countless in number (Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). Further, Sheldon and Schuler (2011) questioned whether needs are gained through learning processes or whether they are an outcome of human heredity.

# CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the literature review suggest that the psychological need concept has been conceptualised in many ways in diverse theories. Therefore, needs theories are usually debatable (Ryan, 1995). While some theorists consider needs as inherent and global in individuals (e.g., Goldstein, 1939; Maslow, 1943), other theorists perceive needs as acquired individual differences in motivation (Atkinson, 1982; McClelland, 1985). In summary, SDT takes needs as intrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, unlike the other learning theories, SDT defines needs at the psychological level rather than the physiological level. As discussed above, though SDT is a significant theory of motivation, s e v e r a l alternatives and limitations could be revealed. Drawing on existing literature, this paper attempts to place the significance of self-determination theory in relation to intrinsic motivation.

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