

Autonomy and Self-Regulation

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The target article summarizes well the current state of the literature of self-determination theory and its predecessors. Deci and Ryan (this issue) and their many collaborators have generated a large body of evidence, constituting impressive support for many of their assertions. Whether or not one agrees with all aspects of their analysis, it's hard not to be impressed by the breadth of their efforts to develop a viewpoint on human behavior that is humanistic as well as organismic. In the target article they also extended their discussion to a wide range of theories that have focuses different from their own. In so doing, they made a strong claim for self-determination as a comprehensive statement on human nature.

In our commentary, we devote our attention largely to issues that we think still lack clarity, assumptions that seem arbitrary, and points on which we disagree (for a discussion that is wider ranging, see Carver & Scheier, 1999b).

What Is Autonomy?

An aspect of this theory we always have trouble with is the concept of autonomy. In fact, we have several problems with it, starting with how it is defined within the theory.

Defining Autonomy

What does autonomy mean? The nearby dictionary defines autonomy as "the quality or state of being self-governing; ... self-directing freedom and esp. moral independence." A check on the adjective form "autonomous" adds "undertaken or carried on without outside control; self-contained; responding, reacting, or developing independently of the whole" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1984) Autonomy, then, seems to be self-direction, self-determination—plain and simple.

In contrast to this, however, the target article (this issue) includes the following statements: "autonomy concerns the experience of *integration* [italics added] and freedom; it is in people's nature to develop greater autonomy (as represented by greater *integration* [ital-

ics added] within the self); and autonomy, as a human characteristic, is an extension of this deeply evolved tendency [toward integrated functioning]." It seems clear that autonomy has very different connotations in self-determination theory than it does in everyday language. We think it is confusing to use the word this way. We believe the matter of self-determination is logically distinct from the matter of integration within the self, and that the two should be kept separate.

Deci and Ryan wrote elsewhere in the target article that the development of an integrated self reflects a deep inner design of the human organism toward self-cohesion and the avoidance of self-fragmentation. We have no problem accepting this principle. This principle fits very nicely with a hierarchical organization of goals and development (Carver & Scheier, 1999b). We just object to seeing it incorporated into the term autonomy.

Is Autonomy Real?

Apart from the issue of whether integration should be included in it, what else is bothersome about the concept of autonomy? Another thing that's bothersome is the question of whether true autonomy actually exists. We raised this question earlier (Carver & Scheier, 1999a), asking whether true independence of action ever really exists—in effect, whether there is free will. Clearly people experience a stronger sense of independence and self-determination at some times than at others. Just as clearly, however, the subjective experience of free will does not make it true in reality (cf. Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). We are happy to have the sense of self-determination (at times), but we retain some skepticism over whether that sense is illusory.

On the other hand, it isn't clear whether the importance Deci and Ryan place on autonomy is about whether or not people truly *are* autonomous. The issue instead may be whether people "need to *feel* [italics added] autonomous," as Deci and Ryan (this issue) wrote at one point in the target article. Perhaps the universal need is actually the need to screen away enough of the controlling pressures to *feel* the sense of self-direction, even if it happens to be illusory. Ryan and Deci (1999) placed great weight on the fact that feeling a

sense of self-determination promotes better outcomes of various sorts, as do Deci and Ryan in the target article. Yet those findings cannot shed light on whether it is the *perception* of autonomy or the *existence* of autonomy that matters.

Does Everyone Want Autonomy?

People in Western culture do seem to like to feel autonomous. However, we've also wondered how universal this desire really is (Carver & Scheier, 1999b). Of considerable interest, in this regard, are the findings (discussed in the target article) reported by Iyengar and Lepper (1999). That research found that reflections of intrinsic interest among Asian-American children were greater when a close and trusted other (their mother, their classmates) made a choice for them than when they made the choice themselves.

Deci and Ryan interpret these results as indicating that the means through which autonomy is expressed can differ across cultures, an interpretation we find a little strained. Deci and Ryan say that "in some East Asian cultures, people may feel both highly volitional and autonomous when endorsing and enacting values of those with whom they identify" (this issue). We will not dwell on the discrepancy between this and the dictionary definition of autonomy. But we are compelled to ask what evidence sustains the conclusion that the children whose mothers chose for them were feeling autonomous, as opposed to the conclusion that the desire for autonomy is a Western phenomenon. We must also ask why the Asian-American children who chose for *themselves* apparently did *not* feel autonomous. If the essence of autonomy is self-determination, how could their actions possibly be more self-determined than by making their own choices?¹

The Self In Self-Determination

A final point about the use of the terms autonomy and self-determination: Again we put aside the issue of integration and deal only with the dictionary definition of autonomous as self-governing. There remains a fur-

¹As an aside, we offer the speculation that Asian-American children may hold the belief that their mothers and peers typically make wiser or better choices than they would make themselves. If so, they would prefer to relinquish control over the choice, because relinquishing control would promote a better outcome. This would render the pattern consistent with the view that obtaining a desirable outcome is more important than exerting personal control over the outcome, a view that we have and others have promoted (see, e.g., Burger, 1989; Carver et al., 2000; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Skowronski & Carlston, 1982). Although we are mindful of Deci and Ryan's point that autonomy is not quite the same as personal control, this extrapolation seems not unreasonable.

ther definitional problem here. To Deci and Ryan, the "self" in the term self-governing or self-determining means more than just an "internal" perceived locus of causality (despite their occasional emphasis on I-PLOC). An internal locus of the origination of the act (i.e., the impetus starts from within the person) does not equal self-determination in this theory. In this theory an action is self-determined only if it reflects a value of the "true" self.² Deci and Ryan acknowledge that their concept of self is very different from the self in most other views. From their perspective, not everything that's inside the person's mind is a part of the true self.

This point is easy to lose track of. In an early draft of our commentary, one of us wrote that self-determination can be exercised by stepping onto a busy highway without looking, but that's not right. Internal perceived locus of causality could (we assume) be reflected in such an act, if the impetus to act originates inside the person's mind. So could self-governance, in the sense that the decision to act is made on one's own with no outside interference (the dictionary definition of autonomy). The act could be freely chosen. But upon further review, such an act probably would not be autonomous in the Deci and Ryan view, because it fails to advance a value of the true self, and indeed may conflict with an important value of the true self (desire for self-preservation).

This difference in assumptions about what constitutes the self can make debate difficult. It's not that Deci and Ryan are not explicit about taking a position that's different from those taken by others. They are explicit that they do so. But it's hard for at least some of us to keep the difference in mind, and difficulties in communication do arise on that account (for a broader critique of the true self as a construct, see Carver & Scheier, 1999b).

The Core Needs Are Not Structurally Equivalent

Another set of issues is raised by the nature of the basic needs that Deci and Ryan postulate. Throughout their target article, they refer to the three fundamental human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Relatedness is a relative latecomer to the Deci and Ryan model, which formerly incorporated only self-determination and competence. Adding relatedness broadens the theory. However, relatedness also differs in a fundamental way from the other two needs.

²The notion of a "true" self is on the one hand appealing, and on the other hand maddeningly difficult to be precise about. One of the problems many observers have had with self-actualization models is that it is very hard to specify a priori what anyone's true self consists of and thus what kind of behavior is self-actualizing for that person.

Relatedness Is Different in Form

Relatedness concerns a “content” domain of behavioral experience (albeit a broad one). The other two basic needs are not content needs. The need for competence applies in principle to any domain of behavior, as does the need for self-determination. Indeed, competence and self-determination are qualities that could readily be applied to relatedness. That is, some people are good at maintaining relatedness (are competent at it), others are not. Some people feel that their efforts to be connected to others are self-determined and authentic, others feel they “ought” to be connected to others and are trying to be so in order to satisfy those conditions of worth.

This difference between relatedness and the other supposed core needs raises a number of questions. Why is this particular content need special? Are there no other psychological content needs that are universal besides this one? The other two needs that Deci and Ryan postulate have to do with the “why” of behavior (actually, the more we think about it, the more they seem to be part of the “how” of behavior—that is, behavior being done well and done freely). Can it be that the need for relatedness is the only universal “what” of behavior?

Self-Determination Moderates Competence

The two noncontent needs also turn out to have another important relationship to each other, which renders suspect the status of at least one of them as a basic need in and of itself: Deci and Ryan say that their view is very different from others that emphasize constructs such as personal efficacy. Their position is more narrow and specific. In their view, efficacy or competence is not valuable unless it is efficacy at the right activities, being done under the right circumstances. More specifically, competence is desirable only if it pertains to an activity that authentically reflects some value of the true self, and is being engaged in freely rather than being controlled.

This conditional quality does indeed make their theory different from others that emphasize competence. At the same time, however, this conditional quality is a double-edged sword. It also places a boundary on the relevance for human well-being of the need for competence. It means that the need for competence cannot be fundamental in the sense of applying to all domains of behavior.

Thus, competence does not stand on its own in this theory. Competence matters only in interaction with self-determination. Being highly competent at breaking into houses is not good, because housebreaking does not reflect the true self, even if one is choosing

freely to engage in it (question: does this remain true even if the housebreaking stems from such motives as the desire for fun, or curiosity, rather than the desire to steal?). Being competent at the piano is not good if the reason for it is your mother standing over you with a switch for 10 years forcing 2 hr of practice every day. Competence is good only if it furthers some value of the self, and does so freely and without coercion. What’s beneficial is behavior that simultaneously reflects competence and self-determination.

This moderation of the positive value of competence by self-determination raises a methodological question. Moderation or synergistic effects should be tested via interactions between the predictors (Carver, 1989). Do researchers testing the role of competence and self-determination approach the question in designs that permit testing for interactions? If not, this would seem to be an important avenue for further exploration.

Although we’ve focused on the issue of moderation with respect to competence, the question can also be raised for autonomy. Does self-determination stand on its own? Is behavior beneficial if it is self-determined but not competent? If it is not, the same two problems pertain to self-determination as apply to competence. It cannot be fundamental in the sense of applying to all activities, and the proper test of its effect is its interaction with competence.

Why Is Competence Necessary for an Activity to Relate to the Authentic Self?

A final question about these needs (also raised in Carver & Scheier, 1999b) concerns the role that the theory assumes for competence in the authentic self. We’ve always found it odd that competence per se should be a hallmark of the authentic self. What if a person wants to do something for perfectly authentic and intrinsic reasons, but is horrible at it? We can readily see how this person would have trouble having a “flow” experience while engaged in the activity. But why should this desire (this goal) not be part of the person’s authentic self?

We are not arguing here that Deci and Ryan’s position reduces to an efficacy model. As noted earlier, in their view it is not beneficial to be efficacious at an activity that’s imposed on you, or is irrelevant to your true self. Efficacy is desirable only with regard to values that are authentic. But if the value is authentic, efficacy seems very important indeed. In fact, it seems from what Deci and Ryan have written in various places that efficacy is one determinant of whether the value is authentic. We find that hard to understand.

Avoidance and Autonomy

In considering the distinction between self-determination and control, we have argued that many controlled actions appear to have their origins in the attempt to avoid some undesired state, either sanctions from outside or self-sanctions (Carver & Scheier, 1999a, 1999b). In this respect, they appear to resemble "ought" self-guides (Higgins, 1987, 1996)—values that people approach, but which seem to have a partial basis in the attempt to avoid other self-guides such as the "feared" self (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999). Ryan and Deci (1999) rejected this argument, holding that the distinction between approach and avoidance is unrelated to the distinction between self-determined and controlled behavior. They reiterated that position in the target article.

Some of the data suggest otherwise, however. As noted in the target article, Ryan and Connell (1989) found that introjected (controlled) and identified (autonomous) regulation related to motivated effort in schoolchildren. However, introjected regulation also related to anxiety, whereas identified regulation related to enjoyment. Why were the children who were engaged in introjected regulation *anxious*? Anxiety relates to avoidance processes (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Davidson, 1992; Gray, 1987; Higgins, 1987, 1996; Roseman, 1984). This pattern of findings thus seems consistent with the idea that introjected regulation in these children is rooted in an avoidance impulse—avoidance of a sense of guilt or shame.

Eliot and Sheldon (1998) conducted another project bearing on this issue. They had participants report 10 goals they were actively pursuing and characterize each as being primarily an approach goal or an avoidance goal. Participants also rated the extent to which their pursuit of each goal was based on reasons that were extrinsic, introjected, identified, and intrinsic. These ratings were used to create indices of autonomy (from intrinsic and identified reasons) and controlledness (from extrinsic and introjected reasons). Elliot and Sheldon found that people who were pursuing a higher proportion of avoidance goals reported less autonomy and more controlledness in their goal pursuit. This pattern is also consistent with the idea that much of controlled behavior has avoidance as its core basis.

Let us be clear about what we are not saying here, as well as what we are saying. We are not making the assertion, which Deci and Ryan incorrectly ascribe to Carver and Scheier (1999b) that approach is autonomous and avoidance is controlled. Our assertion is asymmetrical. What Carver and Scheier (1999b) wrote was "we can think of no case in which a value of the true self as [Ryan and Deci] discuss it has an avoidance tendency as its core motivational basis" (p. 291). Can an action that has approach as its core motivational ba-

sis be controlled? Yes. Can an action that has avoidance as its core motivational basis be autonomous? Because the process leading to avoidance is always coercive (some danger forces the avoidance), we believe the answer is no.

Internalization and Compensation

We also have some comments about how values that are not at first intrinsic become part of the self. Deci and Ryan describe the process of internalization as moving along a continuum of incorporation into the self: introjection moves the control inside the person's mind but not into the self; identification begins an assimilation into the self; integration makes that assimilation more complete. We have no doubt that this is a useful and accurate description of how people change over time. However, it leaves tantalizing questions hanging. In particular, what is the process by which this happens?

Deci and Ryan discuss evidence that certain environmental conditions foster the occurrence of this internalization and others do not. But the mechanism by which it happens was less clearly specified. They wrote that "for integration to occur there must be an opportunity for the individual to freely process and endorse transmitted values . . ." (this issue) and that people must grasp the importance of the values "and synthesize their meaning with respect to other values and motivations" (this issue). It appears that they are saying that internalization typically involves giving the child (a) a rationale for why a value is important, (b) a chance to think about the rationale for a while, and (c) a chance to see that there are links from this to other values that the child already holds. It would appear that the key element is the discovery (through whatever means) of links to other values that are already in place within the self.

Let us reframe this slightly in terms of a hierarchical model of goals, using the core values that Deci and Ryan emphasize. We start with the situation of external control. External regulation of children's behavior entails pressure from the parent, either in the form of cajoling and rewards or in the form of threats and sanctions. As an example, we use the child who doesn't want to practice the piano. Typical tactics to elicit practicing are emphasizing how much the parent wants the child to practice, and emphasizing that the child will be able to go outside and play (or whatever) only after the practicing is done (Figure 1, Section A). These two tactics are controlling, in that they interfere with autonomy. Nonetheless, they rely ultimately on core needs. Satisfying your mother's desires is one way of maintaining a sense of relatedness in the family. Getting to the goal of being able to go outside and play is a way of pursuing an intrinsic motivation.

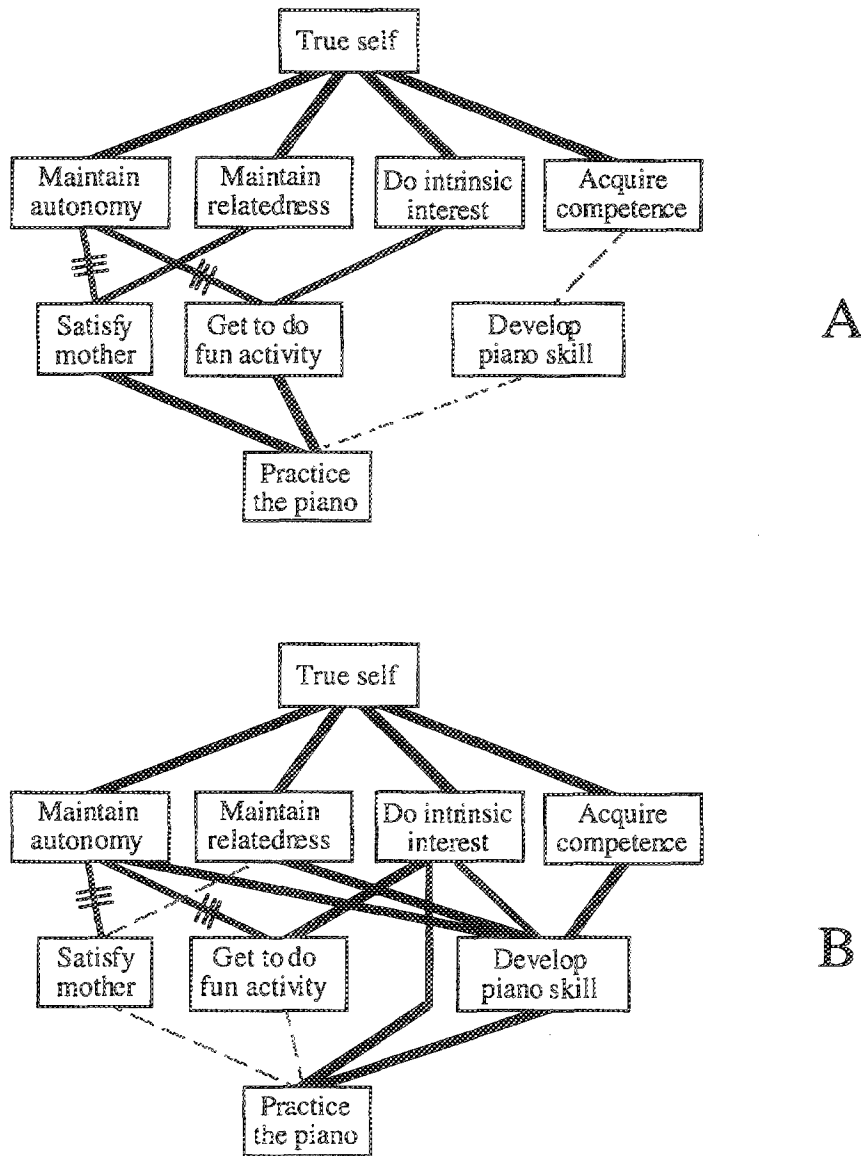


Figure 1. Internalization of a goal into the self, as changes in hierarchical links among self-goals over time and experience. Importance accrues to a concrete action goal in two ways. The action goal may contribute in a large way to attainment of a higher order goal (indicated by a thicker line here), or it may contribute to attaining several higher order goals at once (indicated by a larger number of upward projections). Interference with attaining a higher order goal (what one might think of as an inhibitory link upward) is indicated here by barred lines. (A) This child is being induced to practice the piano by the mother, who emphasizes how happy it will make her, and that the child can go do something fun only after practicing. Both of these tactics rest in part on presumed core needs (maintaining relatedness, and intrinsic interest in the other activity), though both of these controlling tactics also interfere with the desire to maintain autonomy. (B) Later, these controlling reasons become less important; this child has discovered that developing skill at the piano is a path to an overall sense of competence, to having connections with other people, and also autonomy. Even a sense of intrinsic interest has emerged, with respect both to the development of skill and to some of the activities of practice itself. The goal of practicing the piano has been internalized.

Now fast forward a few years. After having thought about why (or whether) learning the piano is valuable—most importantly, after having experienced other connections among values in the hierarchy of goals within the self, the child is now organized a bit differently regarding relations among higher order values that support the practicing (Figure 1, Section B).

Now the child realizes that acquiring a musical skill enhances personal overall competence, and provides a new path to relatedness (i.e., playing along with others and for the enjoyment of others), and that both of those paths permit the activity to be autonomous. This child has also begun to discover an intrinsic interest in the music making itself, and even in some of the activities

of practicing.³ The relevance of the controlling paths (the links to satisfying mom and getting free to go do something else) has faded. This activity is now identified, possibly even integrated.

As suggested previously, the key to internalization seems to be the discovery that the activity or value connects to some other value that is already in place within the self (either because it is fundamental, or because it has already been acquired). This discovery can be quite serendipitous (see the longer discussion on how new goals are acquired, in Carver & Scheier, 1999b). This line of thought would also seem consonant with Deci and Ryan's assertions at several points that people can be filling core needs even when they are not trying to do so (although they may later discover that they are doing so), and with their statement that finding an activity interesting or important is influenced by prior experiences of need satisfaction.

It seems important, however, to be explicit about the underlying assumption: that for goals and values to be internalized, their attainment must be enhancing congruence within the self. Without this principle, we see no obvious way to account for the absorption of the goals into the self. This example thus illustrates how a hierarchical conception of self can render more explicit one of the processes that is less explicit in self-determination theory.

Compensatory Activity

Deci and Ryan (this issue) contrast the process of internalization with what they called compensatory activities, or substitute fulfillments. The development of compensatory activity is hypothesized to occur when fulfillment of basic needs is repeatedly thwarted. The compensatory motives do not satisfy the thwarted need, but provide some "collateral satisfaction." Presumably that means that they satisfy needs or motives that are not as important as the core ones (e.g., people will work for money to buy food, even if they don't like the work).

The notion of compensatory activities is a part of the theory that seems less well explicated conceptually than others. For example, it is not obvious why the failure to experience relatedness should lead to intensified attempts to accumulate money, a "wrong" goal. Nor is it obvious why accumulating money will enhance the person's focus on the pursuit of this goal.

³This example is framed in terms of a child who actually has some intrinsic interest in the piano. If the interest isn't there at all, that link won't solidify. Further, if the child has no inborn skill at the piano, the sense of competence won't be fed, not will the piano become a means to connect with other people. For such children, practicing may never be absorbed into the true self.

Presumably Deci and Ryan are not saying that success in pursuing money "reinforces" the tendency to pursue money, as reinforcement is not a key part in their theory. Is it that accumulating money, possessions, and fame produces at least a semblance of relatedness that feels better than no relatedness at all? Thus people hold tightly to the ersatz relatedness? But people presumably feel the difference between actual and ersatz relatedness. Why should people who have only ersatz relatedness not simply experience more and more acutely the absence of satisfaction of their core needs? Why shouldn't involvement in pursuing the "wrong" goals lead people to be more ready to abandon those goals? Why (and how) do they become enmeshed in compensatory activities? How (and under what circumstances) could they ever get out of that enmeshment?

We have suggested a different way of thinking about this kind of situation (see Carver & Scheier, 1998), one that rests partly on the ideas of dynamic-systems theory. We suggest that people often find themselves in less than ideal circumstances and become adapted to those circumstances. This idea, which is hardly revolutionary, views the person's behavior less as compensatory than as being "adaptive" in the current life situation (though possibly not at all admirable to an outsider). As long as the behavior remains adaptive (helps the person fit into personal life space—including fitting with the person's other values), there is no pressure to change. Only if the person experiences substantial "error" (which may come from conflict with other values, from demands from outside, from changes in other aspects of the situation) is there pressure to shift, reorganize, move from one life pattern to a different one.

This view would be consonant with the ideas discussed by Deci and Ryan, if one were to accept their core values as being already embedded in the person's hierarchy of self (as Deci & Ryan do, of course). This view adds some interesting predictions, however, including the notion that a shift (if it ever does occur) may be expected to be fairly abrupt (cf. Hayes & Strauss, 1998).

On the other hand, the fit with Deci and Ryan would be less good if one were not to assume that the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are already there and actively pulling at the person. One of the problems many observers have had with self-actualization models is that it's hard to specify a priori what anyone's true self consists of. If an individual's true self incorporates an intrinsic interest in accumulating wealth, for example, who can say that that interest isn't part of that person's true self, and that the accumulation of wealth isn't self-actualizing for that person (Carver & Baird, 1998)?

Although it is disheartening to consider the possibility, it is not clear that the "true self" of every person

is really rooted in values that affirm human connectedness and excellence (cf. Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Might it not be the case that the true self of the sociopath is exactly what it seems—exploitive, unconnected, and entitled; inimical to society, but supportive and protective of its own autonomous well being?

Concluding Comment

Despite their criticisms of cybernetic theories, Deci and Ryan suggest that there is the potential for a successful integration across conceptual boundaries. We agree. For example, we think the notion of hierarchicality adds considerably to discussions of how needs are interwoven, and we think Deci and Ryan's model benefits from explicit consideration of this idea. As another example, Powers (1973, Chap. 14 & 17) discussed in control-theory terms some of the same issues as Deci and Ryan discuss in the context of autonomy needs, including the idea that giving a reward to induce a behavior can impede a natural self-correcting reorganization process (p. 193).

Deci and Ryan criticized the cybernetic model primarily because it doesn't specify a basis for determining what the higher order goals are, that it "seem[s] to suggest that what lies at the top of goal hierarchies is not organismically determined" (this issue). We suspect (once again) that the difference between views in this respect is not nearly as sharp as Deci and Ryan think it is (see also Powers, 1973, Chap. 17).

We offer three bases for this opinion. First, the organismic and humanistic principle of integration, coherence, or congruence within the self is entirely commensurate with self-regulatory control principles. That's what discrepancy-reducing loops do: create and maintain congruency.

Second, a number of people have begun to invoke the principle of self-organization as a basis for emergent properties in dynamic systems (Nowak & Vallacher, 1998; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; for basic introduction see Carver & Scheier, 1998, Chap. 17). Interestingly enough, MacKay (1956) anticipated this notion and described a system of feedback processes that could evolve its own goals (see also Beer, 1995; Maes & Brooks, 1990). In such an arrangement the goals at the top of the hierarchy would truly be "organismically determined"—that is, determined by the characteristics of the entity as a whole in interaction with its environment—not just postulated, as Deci and Ryan did with respect to competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

This is not to say that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are not perhaps key emergent properties within the framework of human functioning. They may well be. Our third reason for believing that the cybernetic and organismic viewpoints are not as different

from each other as Deci and Ryan think they are comes from Powers (1973). In closing his discussion of the control hierarchy he had proposed, Powers speculated on the development of further layers of control. Part of his description of this possibility was not unlike Maslow's view of transcendent self-actualizers:

Perhaps what some see as a universal urge toward Oneness represents the glimmerings of a mode of perception in which all system concepts are seen as examples of higher versions of reality, so that ... what we call 'realities' will some day be manipulated as casually as we now manipulate principles in service of systems. (Powers, 1973, p. 174)

We suggest that the cybernetic (which Powers has also pointed out was an analogy from living to artificial systems, rather than the other way around) and the humanistic-organismic share a great deal. Further explorations of their intersection can only enrich both of them.

Notes

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Aging and the Satisfaction of Psychological Needs

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Deci and Ryan (this issue) provide new impetus to research on human motivation by revisiting the concept of psychological need, and specifying competence, relatedness and autonomy as three needs essential to goal-related activity. Their fundamental postulate is that “humans are active, growth-oriented organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self and integration of themselves into larger social structures” (this issue). As might be expected they provide evidence for this model from research on human development. However they cite relatively little from the expanding field of gerontology.

All research areas in personality and social psychology would benefit from greater consideration of aging. But this is particularly true of the study of human needs. The experience of aging can and does place harsh limitations on needs satisfaction. Research on processes of adjustment and of continued development in adulthood emphasizes the value of modifying goals in late life. For example, models of adaptation associate flexibility of goals with successful aging and

avoidance of depression (Brandstädter & Greve, 1994). But as Deci and Ryan's theory implies, this flexibility is limited by the persisting character of the underlying psychological needs.

Motivation theorists should make more effort in testing their models on older people. The reluctance to give proper acknowledgement to the study of aging is partly due to psychology's traditional reliance on laboratory experiment and student participation. Partly it reflects gerontophobia. Yet there are some striking examples where the study of aging has led to new theory building. Research on the importance of subjective control for health and well-being, for example, began in American nursing homes (Langer, 1983). Likewise, growing attention to the epidemiology of depressive illness among older people, helped the identification of maintenance of self-esteem, as well as social support, as central to the prevention of depression. Subsequent research has established that self-esteem generally remains remarkably stable until late life, but shows progressive loss from the beginning of the ninth decade (Atchley, 1991). Social contacts show the same pat-