

Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy in Life Stories

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Over the past two decades, self-determination theory (SDT) has offered empirical psychology a much-needed framework for understanding the organismic-humanistic perspective on personality. In the target article, Deci and Ryan (this issue) claim that three needs—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—are so fundamental that they may be viewed as innate organismic tendencies. Although we are not in the position to examine this nativistic proposition adequately, we feel we can offer a critique on how the three needs are indeed fundamental in another way. If competence, relatedness, and autonomy are basic psychological needs in everyday life, then they should play fundamental roles in how people interpret and make sense of their lives. Throughout time and across cultures, people have made sense of their lives in story form (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). The purpose of our commentary is to outline the relationship between SDT's three needs and the basic elements of life stories, in the spirit of a synthesis between the organismic and narrative studies of lives.

Life stories are like other stories in that they involve a cast of characters (nameily the self and others), important episodes (e.g., high points, low points, turning points), and an interplay of motivations, intentions, expectations, actions, reactions, and evaluations. Life stories are unique among stories in that they function to organize or make sense of one's own life, providing the person with a sense of unity and purpose in a complex world. Thus the construction and reconstruction of one's life story over time equates to the ongoing process of constructing one's identity (Giddens, 1991; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; McAdams, 1985, 1993; Singer & Salovey, 1993). A person's identity, like other stories, has dimensions of content and structure. Content refers to the thematic substance of the story (i.e., what the story is *about*), whereas structure refers to the formal organization of the story (i.e., how the substance of the story is *integrated*). In telling their life stories, people tend to portray what happens in their lives (i.e., the content) along two dimensions, which Bakan (1966) labeled agency and communion. In our commentary we outline the connections between the organismic needs for competence and relatedness and the life-story themes of agency and communion, respectively. Briefly, agentic themes are found in stories that emphasize the importance of achievement, mastery, and having an impact on one's environment—qualities that closely correspond to the need for competence. Communal themes are found in stories

that emphasize the importance of intimacy, connections to others, and caring for others—qualities that closely correspond to the need for relatedness. We also submit that the structure or integration of life stories is closely aligned with the organismic need for autonomy. Autonomy involves the need to organize one's experiences and behaviors into an integrated sense of self (Deci & Ryan, this issue). Similarly, the effectiveness of a story's structure depends largely on the degree to which the story integrates the thematic qualities of one's actions, experiences, and characteristics. In all, we propose that the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy help answer why life stories conform to the content themes of agency and communion and aim toward an integrated narrative structure.

Need Types and Life Stories

Before describing the connections further, we should note that Deci and Ryan clearly outlined the differences between the types of needs typically compared with agency and communion (i.e., in the Murray tradition) and the types of needs in SDT. The aim in studying the needs for achievement, intimacy, and so forth has been to uncover individual differences, that is, how individuals vary in the degree to which they are disposed toward certain needs (McClelland, 1985). Research shows that individual differences in motives of power and intimacy are significantly correlated with agentic and communal themes, respectively, in life stories (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; Woike, 1994; Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999). In contrast, the aim in studying needs in SDT has been to uncover more universal, organismic facts, that is, how the needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy universally foster psychological well-being and growth. Deci and Ryan have provided considerable evidence that people maintain interest and perform better on projects—as well as attain higher levels of well-being—when given conditions that foster competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, this issue). Thus the individual-differences (e.g., McClelland, 1985) approach asks the question, "How much does the person need the need?" whereas the organismic approach typically asks the situation-based question, "To what extent is the need gratified for the person?" We feel that the study of life stories should speak to both approaches. Life stories indicate the *degree to which people need*, strive toward, and interpret their lives in terms

of agency, communion, and narrative integration (individual-differences approach) as well as the *degree to which people's needs* of competence, relatedness, and autonomy *are satisfied* (organismic approach).

Content: SDT Needs and Life-Story Themes

We find substantial conceptual overlap between competence and agency and between relatedness and communion. We start with relatedness and communion, which share more conceptual space than the other pair. Life stories with content themes of communion emphasize caring for others and connections with others on varying levels. McAdams et al. (1996) identified four main themes of communion in life stories:

1. Friendship and love.
2. Interpersonal dialogue or sharing.
3. Connection with groups, society or humankind.
4. Caring for or helping others.

Deci and Ryan portray relatedness as "the desire to feel connected to others—to love and care, and to be loved and cared for" (this issue). Thus communion and relatedness deal with much the same issues. The relationship between the two lies in the relationship between needs and their manifestations. For instance, people's levels of the need for intimacy (in the Murray tradition) have been empirically related to the prevalence of communion themes in their life stories. We suggest that the theme of communion represents the narrative expression of the need for relatedness, which is evaluated in life stories at varying degrees of fulfillment. Thus it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the degree to which one's circumstances satisfy the need for relatedness partly determines the degree to which one's life story portrays a sense of connection to others and caring for others.

We propose that an organismic approach to agency in life stories would focus on competence and certain aspects of autonomy. Four facets of agency can be identified (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1985, 1993; McAdams et al., 1996):

1. Having an impact on self, others, and environment.
2. Achieving desired goals.
3. Self-mastery and independence, that is, the sense of the self as an individual agent.
4. Status and prestige.

In the target article, Deci and Ryan describe competence as the "propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it" (this issue). Thus competence is closely related to the first two facets of agency, namely *impacting one's en-*

vironment and *achieving valued outcomes*. We suggest that the theme of agency largely represents the narrative expression of the need for competence, which is evaluated in life stories at varying degrees of fulfillment. Thus it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the degree to which one's circumstances satisfy the need for competence partly determines the degree to which one's life story portrays a sense of personal impact and achievement.

Agency also deals with independence and status, which relate more to autonomy than to competence. Although not equivalent to autonomy (as Deci and Ryan mention), independence refers to the aspect of autonomy that deals with one's sense of individuality, that is, the sense of the self as an individual agent. The notion of independence is related to another aspect of autonomy: integration. When a person says in a personal life story, "I'm an independent person" or "things in my life fit together," that person is talking about independence or integration (respectively) as agentic themes. However, autonomy involves much more than the thematic content of independence and self-integration; autonomy plays a central role in the *structure* of life stories, which will be covered in the next section. Finally, status relates to autonomy in that both are ways of defining the individual in relation to others. The difference is that autonomy fosters intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being, whereas status seeking is related to extrinsic motivation and lower levels of psychological health (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Thus status is not part of SDT's organismic taxonomy, although it provides an important example of what autonomy is *not*. (It is worth noting that, although the presence of communal themes in life stories has been found to relate to well-being, the relationship between agentic themes and well-being is equivocal [McAdams, 1985]. Part of the reason for this may be that agency involves extrinsically and intrinsically motivated themes, whereas communion for the most part deals with intrinsically motivated themes.) Overall, then, agentic themes in life stories revolve around the need for competence as well as some aspects of the need for autonomy.

Structure: SDT Needs and Narrative Integration

Content refers to *what* people say in their life stories; structure refers to *how* people say it, how they organize the various facts and themes of life stories. One dimension of structure is ubiquitous in life stories: the degree to which the person creates complexity, which is commonly understood in terms of differentiation and integration (Loevinger, 1976; Woike et al., 1999). Like all stories, life stories range in complexity from the vaguely differentiated and not integrated (i.e., confusing, almost nonstory-like) to the highly differentiated and integrated (i.e., coherent, rich). Unlike other

stories, the life story is about the self, meaning that the story's complexity reflects to a large degree the complexity of the person's identity. Examples of related research on the structure of identity include: ego development (Loevinger, 1976), differentiation and integration in relation to agency and communion themes (Woike, 1994; Woike et al., 1999), and concrete versus abstract self-evaluations in relation to psychological health (Bauer & Bonanno, in press; Linville, 1985). In these cases, structure is viewed more as a process than as a product. We mentioned earlier that autonomy takes the form of life-story content when used as a description of the self. For example, "I've lived my life like I wanted to" is an agentic statement of autonomy. In the structural sense, however, autonomy has more to do with the process of describing than with being a description or product. The need for autonomy, we feel, spurs the perpetual process of trying to organize the complexities of one's daily life. In other words, the need for autonomy spurs whatever it is that holds together the notion of the self.

To paraphrase, Deci and Ryan define *autonomy* as the desire to integrate the various, valued aspects of one's life into a coherent whole. This definition does not view integration as simply the coherent merging of information. Rather, an organismic integration is primarily concerned with coherence and congruence (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Coherence refers to the degree to which the elements of a life story are related to each other. Congruence refers to the degree to which the elements of a life story are related to what one values most—in organismic terms, the degree to which the elements of a life story foster intrinsic motivation. Several researchers and theorists have claimed that a mere assemblage of facts in a life story does not point to the person's identity; identity emerges as the person ascribes personal value and meaningfulness to those facts (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Klinger, 1977; McAdams, 1985, 1993; Taylor, 1989). To that we add the finding that some personal values are more "personal" than others, namely those that foster intrinsic motivation (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Therefore, although coherence and congruence play important roles in personal integration and autonomy, congruence (with its emphasis on personal value) would appear to be more effective in terms of well-being (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the degree to which one's circumstances satisfy the need for autonomy partly determines the degree to which one's life-story structure integrates the story's contents, particularly in terms of intrinsically motivating values.

Conclusion

In our commentary we attempt to fortify the target article's claim that SDT's three needs are fundamental

by demonstrating how the three needs underlie the content and structure of life stories. Our assumption was that, if the three needs were basic, then they should be reflected in the basic components of life stories. In short, the needs for competence and relatedness are reflected in the life-story themes of agency and communion, whereas the need for autonomy is primarily reflected in the structural integration and congruence of life stories. We feel that the organismic and life-story approaches as traditionally studied have much in common. However, much of the personality research on SDT has occurred on what McAdams (1995) labeled Level I, the study of traits, and Level II, the study of goal constructs, such as personal strivings and personal projects (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995, 1998; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Haridi, 1997). Research on life stories is typically a Level III pursuit, aiming to understand how a person organizes and makes narrative sense of a personal life over time. We envision future research that synthesizes SDT and life stories in an effort to understand, among other things, how people interpret their life conditions in terms of SDT-related needs and motivations, how people plan their lives of love and work in the direction of personal growth and well-being, and how people figure out what "really" interests (i.e., intrinsically motivates) them.

Note

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Why Intraindividual Needs Are Not Enough: Human Motivation Is Primarily Social

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In their extensive review of self-determination theory (SDT), Deci and Ryan (this issue) argue that there are three innate human needs, that is, for autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to SDT, in the pursuit of goals, fulfillment of these needs is essential for psychological growth and in particular for well-being. Their theory is based upon an impressive amount of work on the importance of intrinsic motivation in a variety of domains, and it would seem an important step to link findings from this line of work to broader theoretical and metatheoretical issues, and to consider what research on intrinsic motivation tells us about basic human needs. However, we see a number of limitations of this theory. We believe that Deci and Ryan may be aiming too high by drawing rather far-reaching conclusions from findings on a specific phenomenon, and, more importantly, by paying too little attention to the social context of human behavior, and in particular the social nature of human motivation.

We feel that there is not enough evidence to substantiate the crucial and central role of precisely the three needs proposed by SDT play in determining well-being. To begin with, there is something tautological about this approach as the concept of *well-be-*

ing is defined as "experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (this issue). On the basis of the argument that the fulfillment of specific needs is associated with a high well-being, there are many other potential conceptualizations of needs that would be supported by similar evidence. For example, Deci and Ryan cite evidence that employees' reports of satisfaction of their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness in the workplace were related to self-esteem and general health. However, work on psychosocial stress in work settings has identified numerous stressors that are related to a low well-being, including role conflict, low status, role ambiguity, and work overload, and so forth (Buunk, De Jonge, Ybema, & De Wolff, 1998), but that are not always easy to relate to the three needs SDT proposes. Moreover, although SDT suggests that there are no innate individual differences in need strength, it is somewhat difficult to understand why there are at the same time learned individual differences in causality orientations—the general tendencies toward perceiving autonomous, controlled, and impersonal causality in the regulation of behavior. The vast literature on personality differences in, for example intellectual