Deconstructing relationships, complementarities and contradictions between autonomy and relatedness: A critical exploration of Self-Determination Theory

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Introduction

Abstract: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that human development and optimal functioning emerges from the satisfaction of three non-competing psychological needs from which autonomy and relatedness are two of them. While wellbeing theories differ, most of them agree that personal autonomy and social relationships are central to wellbeing. This work critically examines the relation between them, its contradictions and complementarities.

Problematic: A previous work[1] suggested that the excessive focus of SDT in the concept of autonomy, and the epistemology of the studies, has obscured what I argue is crucial for a better understanding of the dynamics of the theory.

➜ The importance of relationships for wellbeing and for the fulfilment of autonomy.

- **Impact of social relationships on wellbeing**

Social connections → 🙂   No Social connections → 🙁   Other impacts 🤔

- **Conformity**: Particularly relevant for the expression of autonomy is the study of *normative influence* which is mainly associated to people's need of relatedness. People conform to external pressures in order to gain social approval or to avoid social rejection.
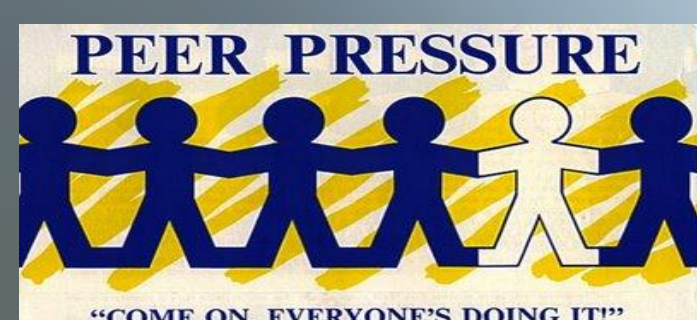
VS Autonomy?

SDT researchers have long advocated for the complementarity of the needs stressing that they should not be seeing as opposing each other[2]. Nonetheless, in the context of normative conformity, expressing own beliefs or being self-endorsed might be a difficult choice to make.

Research Questions: *What is the impact of relationships perceived by the participants? To what extent does relatedness facilitate or undermine the expression of autonomy? Are they compatible needs?*

Methodology

A qualitative exploration of a range of real life experiences and its complexities of satisfying both the need of autonomy and relatedness at the same time within external influences.

Method: 30 minutes semi-structured interviews where the participants exposed their choice, motivations, consequences and the context where it took place.

Sample: A 'convenient sample' with secondary and primary data (9 total). Four interviews used previously[1] were re-analysed with the shift in focus and the specific questions (one was conducted by the author for former study, and three were courtesy of BBC), and other five conducted by the author for this specific research. Importantly, interviewees are residents of Great Britain, USA, and Mexico who exerted an autonomous choice.

Literature cited

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2.- Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (2000) The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, pp.227-68.
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5.- Kagitcibasi, C. (2005) Autonomy and relatedness in cultural context. Implications for self and family. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 36(4), pp.403-22.
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Findings and Discussion

Two interconnected dimensions:

1.- Impact of relationships: Responses illustrate the comprehensive impact that social relations have for human beings.
➜ *Positive impact* (intrinsic and support effect)
➜ *Negative impact* (intrinsic, inadequacy of support received)
➜ *Ambivalent impact*

2. - Autonomy and Relatedness: Complementarities and Contradictions
This interaction is analysed in two different stages. The first stage identifies perceptions of the *process* (facilitators/obstructers) to feel self-endorsed. Yet, to know that this was not only a passing phase in these relationships, the second stage examines the final *outcomes* reported of exercising autonomy.

(a) First stage: Facilitators and Obstructers
Only three persons declared autonomy supportive relationships. Conversely, most cases (8/9) recognised close relationships as obstructers of autonomy in the form of normative influence. Interestingly, three cases constructed their autonomous choice as a consequence of their need of autonomy being thwarted by the people they felt connected to. Therefore, to answer *if relatedness facilitate/undermine autonomy* is a complicated task which certainly needs further scrutiny. Yet, noticeable autonomy was repeatedly in tension with autonomy.

(b) Second stage: Outcomes of autonomy
Although all participants expressed that it was the right choice to make, findings indicate **that exercising autonomy involved a critical undermining of relatedness in all cases**. Though, in two cases there was a particular outcome, there was a negative impact in some relationships but it also enhanced others. Thus, in these cases, the compatibility would be contingent to the source of relatedness involved. Hence, considering that both needs were central elements in people's accounts, in this sample, autonomy and relatedness can be better understood as *constituents* of individuals but not necessarily complementary.

In sum, First and Second stage suggest:
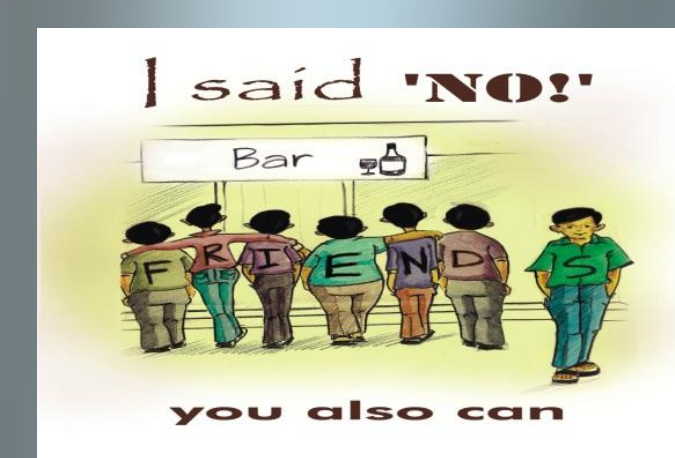
Autonomy ⬅ Trade-off ➡ **Relatedness**

Conclusion

This study has engaged in two different but interconnected areas. The **dimension of social relationships** challenges the usual conceptualisation of relationships as one-dimensional. The disregard of the negative side of relationships can be problematic[3]. This becomes even more important now that wellbeing is becoming central to inform social policies[4].

On the other hand, the **dimension of autonomy and relatedness** has wider implications in many SDT assertions. For instance, in the suggestion that non autonomy supportive environments results in the development of extrinsic motivations[2]. Furthermore, SDT's claims about the compatibility of autonomy and relatedness found in diverse studies. Contrary to these arguments, the **trade-off** between these two needs was emphasised in both stages, and most (8/9) of the motivations expressed for exerting the choice were intrinsic in SDT terms. Moreover, the fact that the sample involves only *successful* cases (overcoming external pressure) indicates that people might very often find themselves satisfying the need of relatedness at the expense of autonomy.

Further study should be directed in these areas. It has been asked before what happens when the need of autonomy and relatedness confront each other?[5] And it is a question that remains unanswered. Research, can also be directed to identify the situations in which these two needs conflict. Likewise, studies of need supportive environments and wellbeing do not inform anything about the person reporting lower scores of wellbeing. Is it because need undermining environments resulted in the development of extrinsic values?[6] Is it the result of a tension between autonomy and relatedness? Or is it because not all needs are being fulfilled?

The excessive emphasis on autonomy may result in the disregard of the far reaching impact of relatedness to facilitate or undermine the first.