

Thematic Issue: Autonomy, Volitional Motivation, and Wellness

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Autonomy is the experience of being the author and origin of one's behavior—the subjective experience that one's moment-to-moment activity authentically expresses the self and its needs, desires, and intentions. This experience matters in people's lives, and it matters in important and far-reaching ways, as autonomy functions as motivational support to people's positive functioning (e.g., engagement, learning, performance, intrinsic motivation) and well-being (e.g., positive affect, vitality, self-esteem, mental health; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hence, autonomy is now recognized as a core theoretical concept in the study of human motivation and emotion.

This special issue of Motivation and Emotion reflects the ascendancy of autonomy as a core theoretical concept, and it continues a 35-year tradition which essentially began with the birth of self-determination theory and Deci's (1971) publication on how extrinsic rewards affect intrinsic motivational processes. This issue is comprised of a thematic collection of papers drawn from submissions over the past year. They build on this research tradition, and do so by conceptualizing autonomy either as a psychological need, a state-like experience, a marker of high-quality motivation, or an outcome in its own right. What the papers all have in common is their documentation of the fundamental role that autonomy plays in people's volitional motivation and psychological, emotional, and physical wellness.

The first set of papers investigates *autonomy as a psychological need* to show how its pursuit and satisfaction promotes volition and wellness. Miquelon and Vallerand show how the pursuit of autonomous goals in academic life is associated with both happiness and self-realization, particularly when academic life turns stressful. Vansteenkiste and his coauthors show how autonomy need satisfaction in the

daily lives of Chinese students is associated with greater vitality and psychological well-being and also how it protects against the ill-being of depression. Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski show how autonomy need satisfaction plays out in the virtual world of video games to promote well-being in multiple ways, including enjoyment and the preference to continue to play, stay, and return to that virtual world. Hence, autonomy exists as a fundamental psychological need, and its satisfaction in academics, during video games, and in the daily lives of members of a collectivistic culture promotes many aspects of well-being.

A second set of papers investigates *autonomy as a state-like experience* to show how even its ephemeral emergence promotes volition and wellness. Hodgins, Yacko, and Gottlieb show how situationally-induced autonomy quiets personal defensiveness by lessening people's desires to escape, to self-serve, and to self-handicap. They also show how the easing of these defensive strategies removes performance barriers and therefore facilitate both positive functioning and wellness. Halvari and Halvari show how situationally-induced autonomy leads to wellness in terms of dental health outcomes, as autonomy promotes the volitional motivation people need to engage in the otherwise unappealing oral health behaviors (e.g., flossing) that promote good oral health. Hence, autonomy exists as a situationally-sensitive and situationally-specific subjective experience, and its ephemeral nurturance promotes volitional motivation and well-being while its frustration undermines performance and personal care.

A third set of papers investigates *autonomy as a marker of high-quality motivation* to show how autonomous motivation is uniquely associated with positive functioning. Hagger, Chatzisarantis, and Harris show that high-quality autonomous motivation, as compared to low-quality controlled motivation, is associated not only with the intentions

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to engage in exercise and healthy eating but also with the volitional enactment of these health-promoting physical behaviors. Neyrinck and his coauthors show that high-quality autonomous motivation is associated with a volitional, committed, integrated enactment of religious behavior and with an experience of religion characterized by both rich personal significance and strong adherence. Hence, different types of motivation exist, and what predicts volition and wellness is not so much how much motivation the person has as it does how autonomously-embraced is the motivation one has.

A fourth set of papers investigates *autonomy as an outcome*, one affected by social and cultural forces. Henderlong Corpus, Ogle, and Love-Geiger focus on intrinsic motivation, which is the prototype of autonomy, to show how one type of social praise (mastery praise) enhances autonomy whereas another type (social comparison praise) undermines it for school-aged children. Roth and his coauthors examine how adults socialized in different cultures experience autonomy. In doing so, they articulate the usefulness of a technique to assess autonomy in cultures and contexts that have not yet examined in the literature. Hence, autonomy is important not

only because it underlies positive functioning, but autonomy is important for its own sake and in its own right.

Collectively, these nine papers confirm the central conceptual status of autonomy in understanding and promoting people's positive functioning and psychological, emotional, and physical well-being across a wide range of domains—including school, exercise, religion, health, and even the virtual world. By showing the numerous ways and numerous domains in which autonomy supports people's positive functioning, these papers bring attention back to the concept of autonomy itself and how its nurturance yields exciting, robust, deeply meaningful, and wide-reaching benefits.

References

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