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A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN  
PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Psychology  
University of Houston



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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Psychology

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By  
Aruni Kumali Nanayakkara

May 2001

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## Abstract

Research has shown that experiencing a sense of choice and being intrinsically motivated produce optimal outcomes in several domains, including relationships (see Blais et al., 1990). However, choices made for us by close others may also have beneficial outcomes, particularly if cultural values promote interdependence. Two hundred and eight American men and women and 197 Sri Lankan men and women currently in a romantic relationship completed questionnaires on cultural values (individualism and collectivism), the reasons why (intrinsic and extrinsic) they are currently in their relationships, relationship quality (moral commitment, enthusiastic commitment and satisfaction), and demographics. Two models, one postulating that cultural values would influence the reasons individuals are in their relationships, which in turn would be related to relationship quality and, a second, that cultural values would moderate the link between relationship reasons and relationship quality were presented. Path analysis and hierarchical multiple regression revealed that cultural values played more of a moderation than a mediation role, when participants' cultural values were discrepant from the culture in which they lived. Specifically, American collectivists were more satisfied with and more morally committed to their relationship when they had extrinsic, especially family oriented, reasons for being in their relationship and Sinhalese speaking Sri Lankan individualists were more satisfied and more enthusiastically committed when they had family oriented intrinsic reasons for being in their relationship. The present research also strongly supported and extended the results of Blais et al. (1990) to additional relationship outcomes and to another culture.

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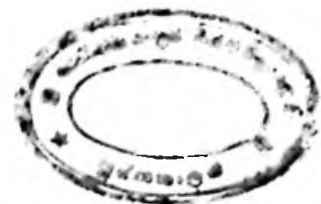


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## A Cultural Perspective on the Role of Self-Determination in Personal Relationships

Self-determination theory is a well-documented and well-supported theory on the value of choice in producing optimal outcomes in several domains (see Deci & Ryan, 1987, 1991 for reviews). Research in this tradition has shown that individuals' happiness in a relationship is influenced by whether or not they feel it is their own choice to be in that relationship (e.g., Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990). However, among the variety of reasons we are in a relationship, some of these reasons may be provided by our partners and parents who also motivate us to remain in our relationship (e.g., Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). In such cases, we may sometimes be happy in our relationship regardless of whether our reasons are truly self-chosen (e.g., Yelsma & Athappilly, 1988). Depending on the extent to which close others are important to us and the desire to make them happy motivates us, we may be happy in our relationship even as we recognize that our reasons for being in it arise from sources other than ourselves.

Cultural values may determine, in part, whether those who are close to us are central to our romantic decision-making. When cultural values promote family harmony and interdependence, individuals may gain pleasure from being in a relationship that provides happiness for close others. Conversely, when cultural values promote self-reliance and independence, individuals may find happiness only when reasons for being in their relationship are perceived to be primarily self-chosen. Indeed, some studies outside the area of relationships have suggested that the experience of choice and its benefits may depend on one's cultural values (e.g., Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). The present work proposes that the cultural values of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 1995) will play a role in the established relation between reasons for being in one's relationship and



relationship quality. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the cultural values of collectivism and individualism will (a) predict more extrinsic and more intrinsic reasons, respectively for being in a relationship, which in turn will predict relationship quality, and (b) moderate the relation between motivation for being in one's relationship and relationship quality such that the positive relationship between intrinsic reasons and relationship quality will be stronger for individualists whereas the negative relationship between extrinsic reasons and relationship quality will be weaker for collectivists.

### Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is in the tradition of other humanistic theories by Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1961, 1970) but differs from them in its wealth of empirical support. Deci and Ryan (1985b, 1987, 1991) have put forth an organismic theory of the self, where the self is assumed to be intrinsically motivated to integrate itself and its experiences with the environment, with self-development as a natural result. Self-development is founded on the fulfillment of three fundamental needs: the need for autonomy or freedom of choice, the need to feel competent, and the need to relate to others. The need to feel autonomous and competent will lead one to seek out experiences and undertake behaviors that are interesting and optimally challenging. The need for relatedness will lead one to seek close relationships with others. The environment can either support or thwart the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs.

### Environmental Support and Regulation of Behavior.

According to Deci and Ryan (1991), the nascent self holds the potential for its own growth and will achieve optimal development if given the opportunity. The environment can facilitate development by supporting autonomy if it promotes a sense of freedom and choice.

One's need for competence can be fulfilled if surroundings are moderately structured and contingencies are unambiguous. Finally, one's need for relatedness can be supported by close others who are involved in and supportive of one's growth.

Depending on how supportive the environment is of these fundamental needs, one's behavior will be more or less self-determined. If individuals are in surroundings that make them feel interpersonally secure, they will engage in optimally challenging and interesting activities (e.g., Anderson, Manoogian, & Reznick, 1976). If contexts also promote choice and competence, behavior will be truly determined by the self and may be best described as "I want to, I intend to, and I feel secure enough to." The environment, however, may not always provide these necessary nurturants. Consequently, the self will experience conflict between its intrinsic needs and environmental pressures resulting in a self that is fragmented and inconsistent.

In extremely controlling situations, a highly fragmented self will experience amotivation and give rise to behavior which is neither intentional nor choiceful (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Situations that are less extreme, but still pressuring, may lead to externally controlled behaviors that are intentional but not choiceful. Environmentally controlled behaviors are contingency-dependent in that they arise from the desire to receive rewards or escape punishment, and thus are less based on choice. However, these behaviors are intentional and may be best described as "I should" (Ryan, 1982). Behavior, then, is thought to fall on a continuum, anchored on one end with intrinsically motivated behavior where the self feels both agentic and competent and on the other by amotivated behavior, which lacks both intention and choice. In between lies environmentally



regulated behavior which lacks a sense of choice but still involves a feeling of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Behavior that was originally pressured by the environment may, however, become more or less self-determined through the process of internalization. The self can avoid fragmentation by accepting and internalizing values transmitted by the culture even though the values may not be intrinsically appealing. Because the core self is intrinsically motivated, having a feeling of choice is key to how completely cultural values will be integrated. When cultural values are accepted choicefully, they will become more deeply integrated within the self. Conversely, the more pressure one feels to adopt these values, the less the values become integrated. This continuum of cultural influences on the self thus ranges from external regulation to integrated regulation (highest internalization), with introjected and identified regulation describing successively increasing levels of internalization (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Under external regulation, one experiences no choice, with a common example being when parents may force a teenager to do homework when he or she would rather not. Thus, in the context of external regulation, the self is controlled primarily by the environment and gives rise to behavior that is minimally self-determined. When operating under introjected regulation, the teenager may feel pressured to do the homework in the absence of parental oversight because parental directives still linger in his or her mind. Under identified regulation, the teenager has incorporated the value of doing homework but hasn't integrated it with other needs, such as spending time with friends. Finally, integrated regulation will lead to behaviors that are the closest to being truly intrinsically motivated because the cultural value is now an integral part of the self (see Figure 1).

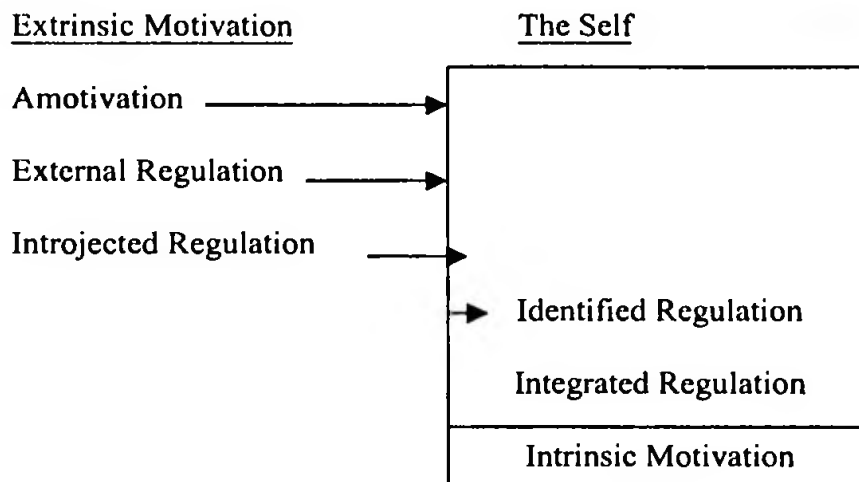


Figure 1. The self-system as a function of environmental regulation.

In sum, self-determination theory holds that intrinsically motivated behavior arises from an authentic self or a self that has chosen to integrate or identify with cultural values. In contrast, environmentally regulated behavior reflects actions constrained or demanded by the environment or oneself. In such controlling contexts, intrinsic motivation is undermined and extrinsic influences are overjustified (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973). For example, Greene, Sternberg, and Lepper (1976) made behavior contingent on external reasons by introducing a reward program to elementary school students. These children had initially enjoyed playing a math game before the rewards were introduced but subsequently lost interest once the rewards were removed. Similar undermining of intrinsic motivation has been shown in response to deadlines, threats, evaluation and surveillance (e.g., Amabile, DeJong, & Lepper, 1976; Deci & Cascio, 1972; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, & Sansone, 1984; Lepper & Greene, 1975).

In contrast to contexts that are controlling, autonomy supportive contexts promote intrinsic motivation (e.g., Swann & Pittman, 1977; Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). Increased intrinsic motivation has been associated with numerous positive

outcomes. For example, children who thought their parents supported their autonomy achieved higher grades and internalized academic values more completely (e.g., Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). In addition, patients who experienced autonomy-facilitating environments were more successful in losing weight (e.g., Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996) and in taking their medication (e.g., Williams, Rodin, Ryan, Grolnick, & Deci, 1998). To summarize, contexts can be more or less supportive of autonomy leading individuals to more or less integrate cultural values with resulting beneficial or detrimental effects.

### Individual differences

Just as contexts can be more or less autonomy supportive, people can be more or less self-determined in their reasons for engaging in a particular behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Similar to research showing the benefits of autonomy supportive contexts, more self-determined reasons were found to produce more positive outcomes such as achievement and competence among elementary school students (e.g., Grolnick, et al., 1991). In addition, less self-determined reasons have been associated with more negative outcomes such as the probability of dropping out of both college (e.g., Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992) and high school (e.g., Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Showing further support for a continuum of self-determination, Ryan and Connell (1989) found a simplex-like structure among external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic reasons for academic behaviors. Less self-determined reasons were associated with higher levels of anxiety in school and maladaptive coping whereas more self-determined reasons were associated with healthier forms of coping as well as enjoyment and interest in school.

