

WITHIN- AND BETWEEN-PERSON VARIATION IN AUTONOMY SATISFACTION: A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The need for autonomy is a foundational construct for understanding effective human functioning and well-being (see Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, little is known about the social-ecological antecedents of autonomy satisfaction. The current study extended the research on autonomy by examining how autonomy satisfaction is related to feelings of social power. Within-subject analyses indicated that feelings of autonomy varied across different social interactions as a function of situational feelings of social power. Between-subject analyses indicated that general feelings of social power were positively related to general feelings of autonomy. The present findings support an ecological approach to studying the autonomy-heteronomy distinction, in which feelings of autonomy are construed as phenomenological reflections of an evolved motivational apparatus for the regulation of behavior in social hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

Within self-determination theory (or SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), autonomy refers to the feelings of freedom and choicefulness accompanying behavior experienced as emanating from one's phenomenal sense of self. The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, which refers to behavior prompted by forces outside one's phenomenal self, by external contingencies within the social environment or by internal pressures concerned with self- or other-approval. Because of the many benefits associated with autonomy (e.g., intrinsic motivation, optimal performance in goal-pursuit, healthy relationships, and well-being), SDT regards autonomy as a basic psychological need.

Although the autonomy-heteronomy distinction is an inherently interpersonal construct, SDT research is guided by a *person-centered* meta-theory. Consequently, little is known about the social-ecological antecedents of autonomy satisfaction.

The current investigation took a social-ecological approach studying the autonomy-heteronomy distinction. Specifically, we sought to examine how autonomy satisfaction is related to feelings of *social power*, one's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). Given that many of the psychological effects of social power correspond to the phenomenology of the autonomy-heteronomy distinction (e.g., feelings of freedom, positive affect, and dispositional behavior) (Keltner et al., 2003), we hypothesized that social power would be positively associated with autonomy satisfaction.

METHODS & HYPOTHESES

Within-person design: We used the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM; Kahneman et al., 2004) to retroactively sample records of 58 Ps' social interactions from the previous day. After systematically reconstructing their day, Ps were asked to report their feelings of power (e.g., "Relative to the others, I was dominant"), autonomy (e.g., "I felt free to be who I am"), competence (e.g., "I felt very capable and effective"), and relatedness (e.g., "I felt close to the other person(s)") during each social interaction.

Between-person design: 61 Ps completed the **Powerful Others Scale** (Levenson, 1981) (e.g., "My life is chiefly controlled by powerful others"), **General Sense of Power Scale** (or GSPS; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) (e.g., "I can get others to do what I want"), and the **Basic Psychological Need Scale** (or BPNS) (autonomy: e.g., "I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily life;" competence: e.g., "Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from what I do;" relatedness: e.g., "People in my life care about me").

RESULTS: WITHIN-PERSON

- The DRM data were analyzed using multilevel models.
- In the prediction of autonomy, significant main effects were found for power, $b=0.38$, $F(1, 193)$, $p<0.0001$.
- A subsequent model re-examined these effects controlling for competence and relatedness. Significant main effects were found for competence, $b = .35$, $F(1, 191) = 17.33$, $p < .0001$, and for relatedness, $b = .35$, $F(1, 191) = 43.16$, $p < .0001$. The main effect for power remained significant, $b = .18$, $F(1, 191) = 10.87$, $p < .001$.
- We ran ad hoc analyses examining the prediction of satisfaction for each of the other two needs from social power. In the prediction of competence, significant main effects were found for autonomy, relatedness, and power. The prediction of competence from power remained significant $b = .20$, $F(1, 191) = 20.28$, $p < .0001$, even after controlling autonomy and relatedness.

RESULTS: BETWEEN-PERSON

Partial correlations between measures of social power and need satisfaction constructs ($N = 61$)

	Autonomy ¹	Competence ²	Relatedness ³
Powerful Others	0.51***	0.29*	-0.09
GSPS	0.36**	0.03	0.24†

† $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

¹Partial correlation with autonomy, controlling for competence and relatedness

²Partial correlation with competence, controlling for autonomy and relatedness

³Partial correlation with relatedness, controlling for autonomy and competence

DISCUSSION

At both the within- and between-person levels of analysis, even when satisfaction for competence and relatedness was controlled, social power still accounted for variance in people's autonomy satisfaction across different social interactions.

The present findings encourage us to speculate about the nature of autonomy as a psychological need. Deci and Ryan (2000) made the case for autonomy as a phenomenological sensitivity that subserves adaptive functions pertaining to problems of self-regulation. However, they did not specify the *selection pressure(s)* that would drive the evolution of such a trait in the first place.

The present findings suggest that the evolutionary significance of autonomy may be bound up with the adaptive problems posed by asymmetries in social power. Fournier et al., (2002) posited the existence of a social rank system (SRS), an evolved motivational apparatus that regulates behavior in power hierarchies. Because many mammalian species live in power hierarchies, the SRS is believed to be a homologous trait across group living mammals.

We propose that in neo-cortically well-endowed animals (i.e., humans) the operation of the SRS is phenomenologically reflected in the autonomy-heteronomy distinction (Di Domenico, MacDonald, & Fournier, 2009).

References

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