

# Understanding Lecturers' Well-being From the Aspects of Self-determination Theory

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There are five changes in higher education across the world in the 21st century. The five changes include changes in the university students, changes in the professoriate, changes in academic administration, internationalisation, and assessment of academic work. These changes are evident in higher education in China. The pressure of the changes on lecturers will have effects on the wellbeing of lecturers. The study discusses the wellbeing under the Self-determination Theory. This theory views wellbeing as a state of happiness. This theory also proposes that people's intrinsic goals like personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contributions can enhance the satisfaction of three basic needs—need for autonomy, need for competence, and need for relatedness. In this way, lecturers can experience a sense of wellbeing. The findings of the study are significant for leaders in higher education who need to implement policies that foster effective work environments.

*Keywords:* lecturers, wellbeing, Self-determination Theory introduction

## Introduction: Background

In the 21st century, although higher education systems have their own characteristics, higher education has become internationalised through more complex combination of global exchange and networks of words and technology, ideas, knowledge, finance, and inter-institution dealings than ever before (Marginson, 2006). Relationships in higher education are structured by cooperation, competition (Marginson, 2006), and change (Altbach, 2000). According to Lee (2008), there are five changes that have occurred within higher education in recent years; namely, changes in the university students (e.g., greater diversity, higher proportion of women, and greater concern for future employment); changes in the professoriate (e.g., greater diversity and increase in vulnerability due to increases in part-time and sessional appointments); changes in academic administration (e.g., administrators increasingly professionally trained as administrators rather than as academics); internationalisation (increase in the number of foreign students as well as closer links among universities), and assessment of academic work (i.e., both teaching and research performance).

These five changes are not unique to china and variants of them exist in many countries with implications for teacher commitment in China. China is already major global force in higher education (Altbach, 2000). As China moves towards international norms of access to higher education, China is expected to account for the main part

of the global increase in student numbers. This will mean a dramatic expansion in the academic equipment and facilities, advanced computer technology, and other infrastructure (Altbach, 2000; Marginson, 2006). At the same time, other issues related to the history, the governmental bureaucratic controls, the internal differentiation between the east and west, the north and south and funding (Altbach, 2000) compound the problems of staff commitment. Within this situation, what does the well-being of lecturers in the universities like? And what kinds of factors will affect the lecturers' wellbeing? The study will discuss these issues under the Self-determination Theory.

Self-determination Theory (SDT) is claimed to be one of the most influential theories in contemporary psychology. SDT has been described by Deci and Ryan (2002) as "an organismic-dialectical meta-theory" (p. 3) which assumes that individuals construct an increasingly complex but unified sense of self over time. This macro-theory focuses on personality development and the self-regulation of behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT has been used extensively to explain how different goals produce qualitatively different patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour (Butler & Shibaz, 2008). Since its formulation, SDT has continued to evolve and includes four sub-theories, the Basic Needs Theory is one of them. The Basic Needs Theory focuses on the relationships between wellbeing and the fulfilment of basic needs and goals.

### **Lecturers' Well-being, Basic Needs and Goals Under the Self-Determination Theory**

#### **Wellbeing**

In general use the term wellbeing describes a person's state of happiness (Diener, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Current research on wellbeing has been derived from two general perspectives: hedonism (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999) and eudaimonism (Waterman, 1993). Hedonism posits that wellbeing is pleasure attainment and pain avoidance. Eudaimonism focuses on self-realisation and emphasises that wellbeing is the personal fully functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The happiness and pleasure of hedonism are obtained from the successful pursuit of human goals, while the happiness and pleasure of eudaimonism arise from integrity to one's true self.

SDT subscribes to the concept of eudaimoni, thereby viewing "self-realisation as a central definitional aspect of wellbeing" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 146). This means that SDT regards human wellbeing as originating in the true self, which is understood to be natural and universal. Thus people's wellbeing is seen as a psychological state. Perspective psychological wellbeing (PWB), which is interpreted as a fulfilment of a natural human potentiality, needs to be nurtured by society and culture in order for individuals to feel happy (Nussbaum, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Therefore, people's wellbeing is dependent on their adjustment to the values and norms of their culture. Diener and Suh (2000) formulated this cultural relativistic position in the following way: "If societies have different sets of values, people in them are likely to consider different criteria relevant when judging the success of the society" (p. 3). By the success of the society they mean the ability by which the society provides for conditions for people to accomplish their own values and goals (Chirkov, 2007). As the needs and goals are predetermined by their society, the better people are adjusted to their social environment, the better their sense of wellbeing (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999).

#### **Basic Psychological Needs**

The fundamental psychological needs of humans have long been a source of speculation; they have been addressed by psychologists including McDougall (1908), Freud (1920), Murray (1938), Maslow (1954) and

contemporary researchers. In early need theories, researchers defined needs from the perspective of physiology and psychology being innate (Hull, 1943) or learned (Murray, 1938). When new theories appeared around the 1960s, the research on basic psychological needs was repudiated. Furthermore, needs were replaced by goals as the dominant motivational concept (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

SDT posited that needs are innate rather than learned. The definition of needs is congruent with Hullian thought (Hull, 1943). Both approaches specify a set of innate or essential nutriments. However, SDT's approach is quite different from previous theories because it is embedded in an organismic-dialectical metatheory (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 229). Further, Deci and Ryan (2002) stated that the three psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential to humans' growth, integrity, and health.

The need for competence involves a feeling of effectiveness when a person interacts with the social environment experiencing opportunity to exercise and express one's capability (Harter, 1983). The need for competence will lead people to seek challenges that are optimal for their capability, and to enhance that capability through activities. The more competent individuals perceive themselves to be at a particular task, the more intrinsically satisfied they are in pursuing their goals, and a greater sense of wellbeing will be achieved.

Competence in SDT is different from sense of self-esteem, as described in Maslow's theory of personality (1954). Maslow's theory postulated five fundamental needs in terms of their importance for human development: physical health, security, self-esteem, love-belongingness, and self-actualisation. Competence in SDT "is not, then, an attained skill or capability, but rather is a felt sense of confidence and effectance in action" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7); "it refers to attaining or exceeding a standard in one's performance, whereas self-esteem refers to a more global evaluation of the self" (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001, p. 326).

Competence in SDT is also different from self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy has some similarity with task-specific, self-concept, and self-perceptions of competence (Pajares & Schunk, 2002). "Self-efficacy represents people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). In contrast, need for competence in SDT involves a feeling of capability to perform tasks and to produce a desired outcome (Harter, 1983).

Autonomy refers to how individuals endorse their actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Connell, 1989). As conceptualised by SDT, it is quite different from self-actualisation in Maslow's theory of personality (1954). Autonomy in SDT "refers to a quality of self-involvement in momentary behaviour, whereas self-actualisation refers to a sense of long-term growth" (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001, p. 326).

From the perspectives of anthropological research and constructionist research, there are two views about the issue of autonomy. Anthropological researchers posit that autonomy, which is understood as actions that emanate from one's self, is one of the human universals (Brown, 1991). In contrast, constructionists posit that autonomy is a moral value which is associated with a social construction in a particular society and culture (Schneewind, 1998).

SDT is generally consistent with the view of anthropology on autonomy. It understands human beings' autonomy as a natural and universal tendency to enact behaviours willingly (Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995) and regards autonomy as a universal psychological need. SDT further argues that although different cultures value autonomy at different levels, autonomy and support for autonomy are universal. The concept of autonomy support (Deci & Ryan, 1985) involves "one individual (often an authority figure) relating to target individuals by

taking their perspective, encouraging initiation, supporting a sense of choice, and being responsive to their thoughts, questions, and initiatives”(Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 17). This means that the more support people experience, the more autonomous they are.

Relatedness describes feelings of connectedness to others with a sense of being cared about and respected, and having a sense of belongingness with individuals and with one’s community (Harlow, 1958). Researchers such as Anderson and Chen (2000), and a number of social psychologists (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) have stated that the need for relatedness may operate and manifest at two different levels: the interpersonal level and the level of the group. Further, McAdams et al. (1996) identified four main themes of relatedness in life stories: friendship and love; interpersonal dialogue or sharing; connection with groups, society or humankind; and caring for or helping others. In the present study, relatedness refers to relationships with peers, family members and friends, students and the university. By belonging to a community and being aware of what is going on, persons feel secure and develop a sense of harmony with the group. They feel supported when they pursue their personal commitments and interests. This “secure relational base appears to provide a needed backdrop—a distal support—for intrinsic motivation” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 235).

The concept of psychological needs has been used to explain behaviour for many decades. During the past decade, SDT has been concerned also with the people’s goals (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In the following paragraphs, the role of goal setting as a contribution to wellbeing will be discussed.

### **Role of Goals in Achieving Needs**

Most contemporary theories posit that people initiate and persist with some behaviour because they believe the behaviour will result in desired outcomes or goals (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In the research on goal-directed behaviour, researchers distinguished types of goals or outcomes. Researchers compared ability-development goals with ability-demonstration goals (Dweck, 1986), as well as approach goals with avoidance goals. All these studies suggested that different types of goals lead to different behaviour and outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

SDT also differentiates goal-directed behaviour according to the content of goals. In SDT, goals are divided into intrinsic goals and extrinsic goals. Goals like personal growth, meaningful relationships and community contributions are labelled intrinsic goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Intrinsic goal pursuits are expected to be positively related to wellbeing. Intrinsic goals pursue the natural growth of humans, and they can enhance satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Thus, they have positive effects on wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

Goals such as wealth, fame and image are orientated to external signs of self-worth. These goals are extrinsic goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Extrinsic goal pursuits entail an emphasis on external manifestations of worth rather than basic needs satisfaction (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Soenens, & Deci, 2006). People who pursue extrinsic goals tend to be more oriented to interpersonal comparisons, contingent approval, and acquisition external signs of self-worth. The implication that extrinsic goal pursuits lead to poorer wellbeing is captured by Deci and Ryan’s (2000) assertion “Thus are, on average, expected to be less likely to yield direct need satisfaction and may even distract from it” ( p. 244). According to SDT, extrinsic goal pursuits are expected to lead to poorer wellbeing (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

The concept of extrinsic goals has also been introduced by achievement goal theorists (Patrick, Ryan, & Pintrich, 1999). In Achievement Goal Theory, an extrinsic goal is defined as a desire to engage in tasks to attain external consequences such as to receive rewards or avoid punishment (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). The theory had been found to predict a variety of negative outcomes, including cheating, avoidance of help seeking, the use of self-handicapping strategies, and less use of regulatory and cognitive strategies (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998). From the perspectives of SDT, however, this conceptualisation of “extrinsic goals” is limited because it emphasises the reasons or motives for tasks, not the content of goals. For example, studying is extrinsically motivated, therefore it involves external goals. But this is a limited perspective. It is crucial to look also at the content of goals; for example, that one is studying in order to amass wealth in the future (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

### Conclusion

The present study discussed the well being of lecturers from the angles of SDT. SDT describes well being as a person’s state of happiness and views self-realisation as a central definitional aspects of well being. SDT posits the three basic needs which are need for competence, need for autonomy, and need for relatedness. SDT also distinguishes goals as intrinsic and extrinsic. The pursuit of intrinsic goals like personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contributions can enhance satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness; thus, these goals have positive effects on wellbeing. In contrast, the pursuit of extrinsic goals like wealth, fame, and image emphasises external manifestations of worth rather than basic need satisfaction, and so are expected to lead to a poorer sense of worth and wellbeing.

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