Autonomous Motivation: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Montessori Method

Jack Eiford
Whitman College

Project Objectives
The main goal of this project is to provide connections between the central concepts of Montessorian pedagogy and those of SDT. Specifically, it aims to:
1. Help Montessorians to see how empirically grounded features of SDT support (and can help refine) their pedagogies.
2. Demonstrate how conceptual distinctions in Montessori’s thought can support and push SDT research in new directions.
3. Provide a strong theoretical foundation for that research.

What is Self-Determination Theory?
Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an argument of motivation posited by psychologists Ryan and Deci (68). SDT depicts Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that satisfaction of the following three needs is engaged in an activity because one feels externally pressured or compelled to act. One therefore perceives the cause of their actions to be located outside of themselves.

Autonomous motivation is engaging in an activity because the act has been chosen and determined by one’s own self. One therefore perceives the cause of their actions to be located within themselves.

Montessori and Self-Determination Theory
Montessori and SDT are both committed to the claim that autonomous motivation characterizes optimal human development and psychological health. What Montessori calls ‘normalization’ and ‘self-perfection’ include as a central component the autonomous motivation posited by SDT. Further, although she uses different terms, autonomy, relatedness, and competence characterize the educational environment and normalized children as described by Montessori.

Controlled motivation: Engaging in an activity for the sake of factors and outcomes that are external to the activity. The activity is entirely instrumental to its end (71).

Autonomous motivation: Engaging in an activity for the sake of itself. The activity itself is interesting, attractive, and worth doing regardless of its end (71).

Integrated extrinsic motivation: Engaging in an activity for the sake of factors and outcomes that are external to the activity, but have been fully integrated into one’s sense of self. Although the activity is entirely instrumental to its end, the individual experiences their engagement in the activity as self-determined rather than determined by external factors and outcomes (73).

The Three Basic Psychological Needs
SDT posits that satisfaction of the following three needs facilitates autonomous motivation (Gagné and Deci 334).

- **Autonomy** is feeling free to choose, endorse, and regulate one’s actions.
- **Relatedness** is feeling connected to other people.
- **Competence** is feeling confident and skilled with respect to both internal and external environments.

Benefits of Autonomous Motivation
- Enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity.
- Heightened vitality, self-esteem, and general well-being.
- Increased tendency to act with more interest, excitement, and confidence (Ryan and Deci 69).

The Three Needs Characterize the Montessori Environment

**Autonomy and Freedom**
- The educational environment should remove children from the external control of adults, and provide them with the freedom to choose their own work (Absorbent 187, Rome 75–76).
- This supports autonomy by allowing children to choose and endorse their own actions.

**Relatedness and the Teacher**
- The teacher should be an attractive figure that supports the child’s development through careful observation and the precise modeling of behavior (Advanced 110).
- The teacher should therefore provide the child with a sense of relatedness in the classroom.
- Limited number of works cultivates respect, cooperation, and relatedness between peers (Absorbent 203-204).

**Competence and the Prepared Environment**
- The classroom and the works are suited to the child’s size and abilities (Advanced 117-118), allowing the child to gain and experience competence by pursuing and mastering his own work.
- All works have a control of error that allows children to feel competent because their success is indicated by the works themselves (Absorbent 226-229).

Directions for Future Empirical Research
Given the conceptual links between Montessori’s pedagogy and SDT, there is prima facie reason to expect that children in Montessori classrooms are autonomously motivated, and are particularly capable of meeting the basic needs posited by SDT. Montessori classrooms would therefore be an optimal environment in which to conduct SDT research. This research could be utilized by both Montessorians and psychologists to improve and refine their respective accounts of motivation and development. Given Montessori’s claim that the teacher is also a scientist (Discovery 4-8), this empirical research ought to be conducted by Montessori teachers. As a start, I suggest the following research topics:
1. Investigating whether the intrinsically motivated work of the child and the adult are indeed different, and observing how the adult’s intrinsic motivation develops during adolescence.
2. Examining how integrated extrinsic motivation can be cultivated in (or before) the adolescent plane.
3. Determining whether the need for competence is satisfied by perceiving one’s self as competent.

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