

## **AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICALLY CONTROLLING PARENTING POSITIVELY PREDICTS STRATEGIES OF PRODUCTIVE LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Study examined the relevance of autonomous study motivation and parental autonomy support for learning and adjustment outcomes in Albanian students. Various cross-cultural researchers state that autonomy is not valued in Eastern cultures and, hence, is unlikely to predict optimal study functioning and well-being. In contrast, Self-determination Theory maintains that autonomous or volitional study motivation is universally important and should predict better learning and higher well-being, even among Albanian students. The goal of the present study was to contribute to this controversy. Findings indicated that autonomous study motivation positively predicts adaptive learning attitudes, academic success, and personal well-being, whereas controlled motivation is associated with higher drop-out rates, maladaptive learning attitudes and ill-being. In addition, Study revealed that parental autonomy support versus psychological control is related to more adaptive learning strategies and higher well-being and that these effects were mediated by students' relative autonomy for studying.

**Key words:** Self-determination theory, relative autonomy, autonomy-supportive parenting, psychologically controlling.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Motivation research has played a prominent role in educational psychology over the past decade. A variety of motivation theories have proven useful in predicting and understanding motivational dynamics among western students. However, during the process of generalization, some of these theories were subjected to strong criticisms by cross-cultural psychologists, claiming that the theories were limited to western

societies and that the findings would not hold in nonwestern cultures.

One of these criticized theories was self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which forms the conceptual basis for the present research. A crucial concept within the self-determination theory (SDT) is the extent to which studying is autonomously motivated. According to self-determination theory (SDT), autonomous actions are those that are regulated and endorsed by the self and are therefore accompanied by a sense of psychological freedom and volition (Butzel & Ryan, 1997). The theory holds that the experience of autonomy and social environments that promote autonomy are crucial for optimal learning and achievement, even for non-western individuals (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001).

Using SDT's self-regulation for learning questionnaire (Ryan & Connell, 1989) that had been successfully used in previous research, we examined whether autonomous versus controlled motivation for learning would differentially predict learning strategies, self-reported learning behavior, drop-out and academic success among Albanian students.

### **STUDY**

The goal of Study was to replicate and extend the findings in two ways.

**First**, we examined not only whether autonomous versus controlled motivation for learning differentially predicted learning outcomes, but also explored their relationship with well-being. Previous studies within the self-determination theory (SDT) tradition among Western samples confirmed that relative autonomous study motivation positively predicts well-being and vitality, where as controlled motivation to study is associated with symptoms of maladjustment, such as anxiety and fear.

**Second**, we examined whether autonomy-supportive versus psychologically controlling parenting (Barber, 1996) would predict students' autonomous versus controlled study motivation.

Several studies have shown that autonomy-supportive versus psychologically controlling parenting is positively associated with various adaptive outcomes in Western children, including more autonomous study motivation, academic competence, and school achievement, whereas it negatively predicts learning problems, depression and distress in emotion-regulation.

The present study aimed to further explore these issues. Based on self-determination theory (SDT), we hypothesized, first, that autonomy support versus psychological control would positively predict learning strategies and adjustment among Albanian learners, because the promotion of an internal perceived locus of causality for studying is said to be universally beneficial. Second, we predicted that the direct beneficial effects of autonomy support versus psychological control on these outcomes will be mediated by relative autonomy for studying.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Procedure*

Thirty-five female (44 %) and forty-two male (53%) Albanian students who had periodically emigrated for on average 8 months filled out the questionnaires during a one-hour session in April 2008. They grew up in five different regions in the South of Albania (Gjirokastrer, Tepelene, Permet). South of Albania people living in these regions are richer and more well-educated than people living in the North of Albania.. They were all involved in a one-year preparatory program in Albania to learn English in order to be able to progress to college or university studies. Participants' age varied from 18 to 28 with an average of 22.59.

### *Measures*

*Self-Regulation Questionnaire-Academics (SRQ-A; Ryan & Connell, 1989)*. Rather than asking for their reasons to study English, they were asked why they are studying in general. The four subscales again formed a relatively clear simplex-pattern and a relative autonomy index(RAI). The composite scales of controlled and autonomous motivation were computed by summing respectively external and introjected regulation,  $r(79) = .39, p < .01; \alpha = .70$ , and identified and intrinsic regulation,  $r(79) = .56, p < .01; \alpha = .82$ .

*Study Thoughts and Strategies*. Three of the four subscales of the Learning and Study Strategies

Inventory (LASSI; Weinstein, Palmer, & Schulte, 1987) were also assessed in the present study, that is, concentration ( $\alpha = .83$ ), effective time management ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and performance anxiety ( $\alpha = .76$ ). In addition, we also included information processing, that is, the extent to which students thoughtfully and deeply process the learning material rather than scanning through it in a rather superficial manner (e.g., "When I am studying, I try to relate things to what I know already"; 8 items;  $\alpha = .79$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all typical of me) to 5 (Very much typical of me).

*Subjective Well-being(SWB)*. Three different indicators of subjective well-being were assessed. We assessed positive and negative mood using the Positive Affect/Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, & Clark, 1988) and we assessed life satisfaction with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The Positive Affect/Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) consists of 20 mood adjectives, 10 positive (e.g., 'excited', 'pleased') and 10 negative (e.g., 'ashamed', 'distressed'). Participants were asked to rate how much they experienced each mood 'in the past month or so' using a 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely) scale. Internal consistencies for the scales in the present sample were .86 for positive affect, and .80 for negative affect.

*Vitality*. This seven-item scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997) assesses participants' global feelings of energy, vigor, and aliveness over the past few months. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert . Internal consistency was .83.

*Physical complaints*. Participants were asked to indicate how often they experienced each of the physical complaints during the past week. Ratings were made on a scale ranging from 1 (Very Rarely) to 7 (Very Often). Internal consistency was .87.

*Parental autonomy support versus psychological control*. Seven items for the psychological control scale were derived from the Parenting Scales (Lamborn etj., 1991), where as autonomy support was tapped with five items from the autonomy support scale of the Perceptions Of Parents Scales (POPS, Grolnick etj., 1991). Psychological control (Barber, 1996) measures the degree to which adolescents perceive their parents as intruding upon their need for autonomy by such means as love withdrawal, guilt induction and instilling anxiety (e.g. "My mother/father is less friendly to me if I don't see things like he/she does";  $\alpha = .72$ ). Autonomy support taps the extent to which parents encourage their children to pursue their own interests and values (e.g. "My mother/father, whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do";  $\alpha = .76$ ).

**RESULTS**

**Plan of Analyses**

We examined the overall effects of relative autonomy on learning and well-being through correlational analyses and the separate effects of autonomous and

controlled motivation through multiple regression analyses. Then, in a last step, we examined through Structural Equation Modeling whether the effect of autonomy support versus psychological control would be mediated by relative autonomy for studying.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. AS vs. PC parenting -													
2. Relative Autonomy Index .	.37**	-											
3. Autonomous Motivation .	.16	.61**											
4. Controlled Motivation -	-.28*	-.55**	.32**	-									
5. Optimal Learning Composite	-.34**	.43**	.43**	.05	-								
6. Information Processing	.16	.26*	.37**	-.09	.69**	-							
7. Concentration	.28**	.44**	.46**	-.04	.91*	.49**	-						
8. Time Management	.34**	.46**	.45**	-.07	.89**	.53**	.81**	-					
9. Performance anxiety	-.33**	-.22*	.10	.16	-.76**	-.23	-.66**	-.59**	-				
10. Adjustment Composite	.24*	.44**	.31**	-.24*	.53**	.22*	.52**	.47**	.53**	-			
11. Well-being	.13	.44**	.28*	-.26*	.54**	.25*	.50**	.48**	.52**	.88**	-		
12. Vitality	.13	.41**	.34**	-.16	.54**	.37**	.51**	.44**	-.45**	.82**	.77**	-	
13. Physical complaints	-.22*	-.21	-.15	.13	.14	.00	-.15	-.10	.20	-.57**	-.30*	-.21	
14. Depression	-.18	-.32**	-.22*	.18	-.46**	-.08	-.46**	.45**	.52**	-.82**	-.69**	-.58**	.27*

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01. AS vs. PC parenting = Autonomy supportive versus Psychological controlling parenting. Table 1. Intercorrelations Between Outcome Variables (N = 79)

	Autonomous Motivation	Controlled Motivation	Interaction	R <sup>2</sup>
Information Processing	.38**	-.02	.05	.14**
Concentration	.53**	-.19	-.01	.25**
Time Management	.52**	-.22*	-.03	.24**
Performance anxiety	-.17	.20	-.02	.05*
Adjustment Composite	.41**	-.35**	-.04	.22**
Well-being	.36**	-.36**	-.11	.22**
Vitality	.42**	-.28*	-.03	.19**
Physical complaints	-.23	.20	-.08	.06*
Depression	-.32**	.29*	-.05	.12**

Table 2. Beta-coefficients of Multiple Regression Analyses with Autonomous, Controlled Motivation and the Interaction Term as Predictors for Learning and Adjustment Outcomes – Study (N = 79)

**Preliminary Analyses**

The correlations can be found in Table 1. Autonomy supportive versus psychologically controlling parenting

was positively correlated with relative autonomy index (RAI), was negatively correlated with controlled motivation and unrelated to autonomous motivation.

Furthermore, autonomy supportive versus psychologically controlling parenting was significantly positively correlated with the overall composite measure of learning and with the specific aspects concentration and effective time management (but not information processing), where as it was significantly negatively related to performance anxiety. It was positively correlated with the adjustment composite measure, was significantly negatively related to physical complaints, but unrelated to the three positive adjustment variables (i.e., well-being, vitality, and depression), although the relations were in the expected direction.

### **Primary Analyses**

*Multiple Regressions.* A series of multiple regression analyses was performed to explore the independent effects of autonomous and controlled motivation upon learning and well-being. An interaction term was computed by multiplying the two centered variables of autonomous and controlled motivation. These results can be found in Table .2.

*Structural Equation Modeling.* The second aim of this study was to explore whether any direct effect of autonomy-supportive versus psychologically controlling parenting on learning and adjustment would be mediated by students' relative autonomy for studying. Data screening indicated partial non-normality at the univariate and the multivariate level.

### **General Discussion**

The results revealed four important findings.

First, experiences of relative autonomy with respect to studying are conducive to optimal learning and academic success.

Second, when this overall measure of motivation is broken down into two primary subcomponents, that is, autonomous and controlled motivation to study, it was found that the former positively predicts adaptive learning and academic success, whereas the latter forestalls the optimal learning process and increases the likelihood of dropping out of the course.

Third, the benefits associated with autonomous study motivation are not limited to learning outcomes, but they also radiate to students' well-being. Conversely, controlled study motivation is associated with reduced well-being and increased depression.

Finally, an autonomy-supportive parenting style that is characterized by the offer of choice, empathic perspective-taking, and the minimal use of guilt- and shame-inducing tactics promotes adjustment and learning by enhancing students' relative autonomy with respect to studying.

### **Autonomy and Independence**

Research indicates that strivings for uniqueness, individualism, and independence are less highly valued in Eastern societies compared with Western cultures, such as Albania. According to SDT (self-determination theory), autonomy is a psychological need and its satisfaction is critical for all individuals' optimal development. Autonomy is not conceptualized as a cognitive preference or an interpersonal value that is more or less emphasized depending on the cultural context, but it reflects the self-endorsement of actions on an inner, intra-individual level. If students' autonomy is defined and assessed in this way, it is consistently positively related to various indices of optimal learning and academic achievement. The positive effects of relative autonomy also radiated to well-being and adjustment outcomes. In a further set of regression analyses, it was found that the two primary subcomponents of the relative autonomy index, that is, autonomous and controlled motivation, have an independent effect upon most outcomes, suggesting that the overall effect of relative autonomy is due to both the beneficial impact of autonomous motivation and the debilitating impact of controlled motivation.

### **Parenting and Autonomy**

A final issue concerns the parental variables that enhance Albanian students' sense of autonomy and willingness to study. If Albanian parents acknowledge their adolescents' feelings, provide a meaningful rationale if choice is constrained and minimize the use of guilt and shame inducing strategies, their offspring is more likely to study out of interest and personal dedication than in order to meet external pressures or internal obligations. In addition, students' relative autonomous study motivation was found to fully mediate the direct effect of autonomy support versus psychological control on a composite measure of learning attitudes and a composite measure of adjustment.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A number of limitations are worth being mentioned.

First, the present data were mostly self-reported; hence, some of the relationships might be overestimated due to method-variance. Future research might include parental reports of parental styles and objective ratings of socially adaptive functioning.

Second, because participants had either undergone or were undergoing a selection procedure for being accepted in a foreign study program, they are likely to be highly selective in terms of capabilities. However,

we expect the current findings to hold among students with lower capabilities as well and we believe it is instructive to see that, in spite of this homogeneity of the current samples, the quality of students' motivation also matters. Notably, because participants had periodically migrated to a Western country or were on the point of doing so, they might have a more independent than interdependent self-concept, which might, according to cross-cultural researchers, explain the beneficial effects of autonomy in the current studies. Future research might want to directly assess students' self-concepts to explore whether type of self-concept moderates the autonomy to learning and the autonomy to well-being relations, as predicted by cross-cultural psychologists, but not by SDT (self-determination theory).

### **Conclusion**

As pointed out by many cross-cultural researchers, the type of values that are prevailing in different cultures can strongly vary: whereas individuality, uniqueness, and independence are central issues in individualistic societies, social harmony, conformity and interdependence are highly valued in collectivistic societies. However, these different interpersonal values can be pursued for very different reasons, which vary from personal ownership and voluntary self-endorsement to coercive obedience and resistance. The present research indicates that such a conceptualization of autonomy appears as fruitful for predicting Albanian students' optimal learning and well-being as it has been in western populations; experiences of phenomenological freedom and volition are vitalizing rather than immobilizing for eastern populations. It is our hope that these SDT-based conceptual insights might contribute to a further exploration of important motivational dynamics that turn around culturally critical issues such as autonomy and independence, control and conformity.

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