

WHY
WE DO
WHAT
WE
DO

*Understanding
Self-Motivation*

EDWARD L. DECI

WITH RICHARD FLASTE



PENGUIN BOOKS

authority—who are pivotal in creating what we call the social context of the people over whom they have authority—can affect the motivation of those people. It also reveals the strategies and needs of people in one-down positions as they strive to maintain and nurture their vitality for life. It is easy to find employees who feel like “slaves,” but it is harder to find active workers who, in a meaningful sense, are their own masters. And not all managers help them. It is easy to find children who feel like part of “the crew,” but it is harder to find ones who feel like the captains of their own ship. And not all parents and teachers help them. These are the kinds of issues that are relevant to fostering the motivation of people in one-down positions and, more broadly, to promoting human autonomy and responsibility within society.

Most people seem to think that the most effective motivation comes from outside the person, that it is something one skillful person does to another. There are numerous prototypes. Think for example of the locker-room speech where the coach, through the power of his gifted tongue, coddles and urges, shames and exhorts, and in so doing turns wimps into champs. Or think of the orderly classroom where the concerned teacher, through the cunning use of rewards and punishments, turns little beasts into compliant learners.

To the contrary, however, all the work that Ryan and I have done indicates that self-motivation, rather than external motivation, is at the heart of creativity, responsibility, healthy behavior, and lasting change. External cunning or pressure (and their internalized counterparts) can sometimes bring about compliance, but with compliance come various negative consequences, including the urge to defy. Because neither compliance nor defiance exemplifies autonomy and authenticity, we have continuously had to confront an extremely important—seemingly paradoxical—question: How can people in one-up positions, such as health-care providers or teachers, motivate others, such as their patients or students, who are in one-down posi-

tions, if the most powerful motivation, leading to the most responsible behavior, must come from within—if it must be internal to the self of the people in the one-down positions?

In fact, the answer to this important question can be provided only when the question is reformulated. The proper question is not, "how can people motivate others?" but rather, "how can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?" When we formulated the question in this way our investigations repeatedly confirmed that the orientations and actions of people in positions of authority do play an important role in determining whether those whom they supervise, teach, or care for will effectively motivate themselves—and, in fact, whether they will develop greater autonomy and authenticity. This book lays out the way these social forces operate to affect motivation and development.

Throughout life people grapple with the issue of whether they are making their own choices—whether their actions are self-determined or, alternatively, are controlled by an external agent or by some powerful force within them. Choice is the key to self-determination and authenticity, and the question of whether someone really chooses to do something is essential to most civil and criminal trials. Millions of dollars may be decided over the issue of whether a patient really did give informed consent to a medical procedure. And the decision between the death sentence and incarceration in a psychiatric hospital may depend on a jury's answer to whether the gunman *chose* to pull the trigger or was forced by some internal urge that could be labeled "temporary insanity."

The issue for society concerns the conditions—both actual and psychological—under which people should be held accountable for their actions. And of course some lawyers have picked up on this and worked to push the balance one way or the other. In the most extreme modern development, the criminal justice system has toyed with the concept of "imperfect self-defense" in which, for example, Lorena Bobbitt or the Menendez brothers do not deny that they committed terrible acts, but maintain that the commission of these acts was not volitional, that they were driven by a personal environ-

ment so painful that they saw no alternative. They aggressed as a self-defense even though they were not under immediate attack. They acted with grotesque violence, it is argued, because they *believed* they had to.

Complex and fascinating as the issues of autonomy and authenticity may be when considered at the level of cultures or interpersonal relationships, they become even richer and more stimulating when viewed solely within the individual. A master-slave relationship exists to some extent within everyone. People can regulate themselves in quite autonomous and authentic ways, or alternatively in quite controlling and dictatorial ways, pressuring and criticizing themselves. The extent to which it is one versus the other depends on the degree of resolution of that master-slave dichotomy.

Many people find this idea easy to comprehend in the case of, say, an addict, who is a slave to her addiction, or of an obsessive-compulsive, who is a slave to his compulsions. But the dynamics are just as relevant for many other behaviors. The dynamics begin as interpersonal processes in the home, at school, and elsewhere, and are taken in by people in ways that are more healthy, or less. Understanding these processes—the intrapsychic processes as well as the interpersonal ones—allows meaningful answers to important questions. It is an understanding that can help people maintain smoking cessation, nurture an unflagging interest in learning, and perform well in sports. It is also an understanding that is essential for locating and anchoring one's true self amidst the seductive and coercive tides of modern culture.

The aims of this book are simply stated: They are to use a comprehensive body of motivational research to examine the relation between autonomy and responsibility and to reflect on the issue of promoting responsibility in an alienating world. The book is full of hope, for it speaks to what we can do for ourselves, and what we can do for our children, our employees, our patients, our students, and our athletes—indeed, what we can do for our society. The pre-

The Need for Personal Autonomy

Although the early experiments had highlighted some negative consequences to the use of rewards as a motivator, the research had barely begun, for there were countless questions remaining to be addressed by carefully designed laboratory experiments and field studies.

To proceed, however, a fuller theoretical account of what had happened in the reward experiments was necessary so it could be used for deriving further hypotheses. Why might it be that people's intrinsic motivation—the vitality, spontaneity, genuineness, and curiosity that is intrinsic to people's nature—could be undermined by extrinsic rewards?

DeCharms's idea that people strive for personal causation—that they strive to feel like an origin of their own behavior—was a start, and the contributions of others like personality psychologist Henry Murray helped to fill out the conceptual picture. Murray had suggested that people have *needs* of the mind as well as needs of the body. Perhaps there is an innate or *intrinsic* need to feel a sense of personal autonomy or self-determination—to feel a sense of what deCharms had called personal causation. That would imply that people need to feel that their behavior is truly chosen by them rather than imposed by some external source—that the locus of initiation of their behavior is within themselves rather than in some external control. This is a rather subtle point, but its significance is quite pro-

found. The implication of people having a need to feel autonomous is that failure to satisfy the need, like failure to satisfy the hunger need, could lead to decreased well-being—to a variety of maladaptive consequences.

The hypothesis, then, is that any occurrence that undermines people's feeling of autonomy—that leaves them feeling controlled—should decrease their intrinsic motivation and very likely have other negative consequences. The next step in the research program became quite clear: It was necessary to determine what other events or circumstances might decrease intrinsic motivation. In other words, what events, beyond rewards, are likely to be perceived by people as *controlling*—as limiting their autonomy?

One likely candidate, one widely used motivator that must surely be felt as controlling, was threat. People threaten others all the time—if you don't study you can't watch television; if you don't get to work on time you will be fired—and they assume that it's an effective motivational strategy. A threat, of course, is not intended to punish but instead is meant to motivate people through their desire to avoid a punishment.

Using the same general Soma paradigm as in the money experiments, we motivated puzzle solving by threatening to punish subjects if they failed to perform well. They did do well enough that they did not get punished, but the experience was a negative one nonetheless. In fact, threat worked much like money; it encouraged them to try to solve the puzzles, but it robbed them of the desire to engage in this playful activity for its own sake.

Other researchers, such as Mark Lepper and his colleagues at Stanford University, added to the list of events that yield similar negative consequences. Deadlines, imposed goals, surveillance, and evaluations were all found to undermine intrinsic motivation. That, of course, made sense because they all represent frequently used strategies for pressuring and controlling people. People experience them as being antagonistic to their autonomy, so these events drain people's sense of enthusiasm and interest in the controlled activities.

In one of the first seminars I taught at the University of Roches-

ter, a student raised the issue of competition. Competition is certainly one of the mainstays of American culture. Tens of millions of people crowd around TV sets on weekends to watch sporting competitions. Encouraging workers to compete against each other to see who can make the most sales or get the best customer-service reports is a typical motivational device in our culture. Surely it is safe to say that competition exerts some motivating power, but how might it relate to individuals' more subtle desires to motivate themselves and to feel a sense of personal autonomy?

One student in the seminar suggested that competition could focus people on winning rather than on the activity itself, much like rewards draw people's attention away from the activity itself. Furthermore, it could be that competition creates a pressure pushing people toward particular ends and away from the activity itself. If this were so, it too could undermine intrinsic motivation. Some athletes in the room thought the idea preposterous. It stimulates intrinsic motivation, they said. So we decided to take the question into the lab.

We modified the Soma paradigm to fit the question we were asking. Subjects worked on three puzzles in the presence of an experimental accomplice who posed as a second subject. Half the subjects were told that their task was to win the competition—to beat their opponent by solving the puzzles more quickly. The other half were simply asked to work as quickly as they could; there was no mention of competing or winning.

The accomplice always let the actual subjects finish first, which in the competition condition meant that the subjects won all three of their competitions. Results of the study indicated that those subjects who had competed displayed less subsequent intrinsic motivation than those who had simply been asked to do their best. The experience of competing had undermined their intrinsic motivation for the interesting task. Apparently, they felt pressured and controlled by the competition (even though they won it), and that seemed to decrease their desire to solve these puzzles just for the fun of it.

While interesting, this whole set of findings is quite unsettling,

because all the events that were found to undermine intrinsic motivation are events that most people encounter regularly in their ongoing daily lives. These forces—the alarm clock that wakes them up, the pressures to get the kids to school on time and themselves to work on time, and the rewards, deadlines, threats, and evaluations they cope with while at work—are all aspects of people's lives that can apparently leave them feeling pushed around, that can leave them feeling like pawns.

At this point, an obvious question arises. Do all these research results imply that, in order not to weaken intrinsic motivation, people should be allowed to do anything they please? Fortunately, it does not. But before we can tackle the difficult questions of how to provide structures and set limits on behavior without killing a person's spirit, we need to address the inverse of what we have just been reporting. We need to consider what factors might increase intrinsic motivation.

It seemed that if controlling people—that is, pressuring them to behave in particular ways—diminishes their feelings of self-determination, then giving them choices about how to behave ought to enhance them. Some colleagues and I tested this hunch. We used a variant of the puzzle-solving paradigm yet again. Subjects in one group were offered a choice about which puzzles to work on and how long to spend on each. Subjects in the other group were assigned the puzzles and time limits selected by corresponding subjects in the first group.

As expected, given that a comprehensive picture was beginning to emerge from all these experiments, the subjects who had been offered the simple choices spent more time playing with the puzzles and reported liking them more than the subjects not offered choice. The opportunity to make even these small choices had made a difference in their experience and had strengthened their intrinsic motivation.

Once again, it was the issue of autonomy versus control, with its various shadings, that was at the heart of the matter. People who were asked to do a particular task but allowed the freedom of having

some say in how to do it were more fully engaged by the activity—they enjoyed it more—than people who were not treated as unique individuals.

It is forever being said that people need to be controlled more, that they need to be told what to do and held accountable for doing it. But nothing in these experiments has given credence to that view as the typical condition of life. Of course, limit setting is important, as we will see, but an overemphasis on control and discipline seems to be off the mark. It represents a demeaning depiction of human experience, and its primary function may just be to provide certain people with an easy rationalization for exerting power over others.

Providing choice, in the broad sense of that term, is a central feature in supporting a person's autonomy. It is thus important that people in positions of authority begin to consider how to provide more choice. Even in crowded classrooms, fast-paced offices, or harried doctors' offices there are ways, and the more creative one is, the more possibilities one will find. Why not give students choice about what field trips to take and what topics to write their papers about, for example? Why not let the work group participate in the decision of how to allocate responsibilities? And why not let patients take part in planning their treatment regimen? It is not always easy to provide choice, but it has become increasingly clear that there will be positive advantages if you do.

The main thing about meaningful choice is that it engenders willingness. It encourages people to fully endorse what they are doing; it pulls them into the activity and allows them to feel a greater sense of volition; it decreases their alienation. When you provide people choice, it leaves them feeling as if you are responsive to them as individuals. And providing choice may very well lead to better, or more workable, solutions than the ones you would have imposed.

Someone told me a story about his aunt who had been taking hypertension medication for years—or rather, she was supposed to have been taking it for years. But she was never very good about