



## Brief report

## Autonomy is equally important across East and West: Testing the cross-cultural universality of self-determination theory

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Self-determination theory (SDT) posits the importance of three basic psychological needs (i.e., relatedness, autonomy, and competence) in promoting achievement. However, some cross-cultural researchers have cast doubt on the generalizability of the theory to non-Western cultures. The primary aim of the study was to test whether provision of support for relatedness, autonomy, and competence would be associated with achievement across both Western and Eastern cultures.

**Method:** We drew on a subsample of students from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ( $n = 92,325$  students from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, and USA (Western societies); and Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Macau SAR, Shanghai, South Korea, and Taipei (Eastern societies); 46,006 were females and 46,319 were males, with a mean age of 15.77 ( $SD = 0.29$ ) years). We used multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (MG-CFA) and multi-group structural equation modeling (MG-SEM) to analyze the data.

**Results:** Provision of the three basic needs correlated positively with achievement across cultures, providing broad support for the cross-cultural universality of SDT. MG-SEM indicated that relatedness and autonomy support were equally important for student achievement in both Western and Eastern cultures, whereas competence support was found to be more important to students in the West than in the East.

**Conclusion:** Findings support the cross-cultural relevance of SDT while at the same time highlighting important cultural variations such as greater importance of competence support in the West, suggesting the need to be cognizant of both cross-cultural universality and variability in motivational theorizing.

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the cultural and ethnic diversity of the student population and potential limitations of theories developed in Western contexts (King, McInerney, & Pitliya, 2018; Zusho & Clayton, 2011). Thus, it is important to test whether Western-developed motivation theories are relevant to students in the East. In this study, we focused on testing the cross-cultural generalizability of self-determination theory (SDT), one of the most prominent motivation theories in psychology and education.

We chose SDT because it puts basic universal (i.e., cross-cultural) psychological needs at the heart of its explanatory model. It posits that when social contexts support the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for relatedness (sense of belongingness and connection with others); autonomy (sense of volition and self-endorsement of behaviors); and competence (interacting effectively

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with one's environment and having opportunities for developing and expressing one's capabilities), optimal functioning is promoted (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

While there are studies that support the generalizability of SDT (e.g., Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010), cross-cultural researchers have criticized SDT's claim to universality, especially as regards to autonomy. They argue that Eastern collectivistic cultures highly value conformity, social harmony, and family interdependence, as opposed to Western individualistic cultures that emphasize individuality, uniqueness, and interdependence (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Thus, students from Eastern cultures might not experience and benefit from autonomy support the same way students from Western cultures do (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003). For example, Liu and Flick (2019) found that autonomy was not a salient predictor of academic performance among Chinese students. In addition, Markus and Kitayama (2003) claimed that Asian children “don't appear to suffer from any obvious negative consequences of the enormous pressure that is placed on them to achieve, in fact, they flourish” (p. 4).

We revisited the key issue of whether provision of relatedness, autonomy, and competence would be associated with higher levels of achievement in order to provide stronger evidence for the cross-cultural applicability of SDT. A limitation of previous studies that tried to evaluate the universality of SDT was failure to include all three basic needs (e.g., Jang et al., 2010). We addressed this by simultaneously including all three basic needs in our study. Another limitation of previous studies is testing SDT within only one or two cultures at most (e.g., Korean students for Jang, Reeve, Ryan, and Kim (2009); Chinese students for Zhou, Ma, and Deci (2009)). We addressed this by using nationally representative data from 11 contexts representing a wide range of Western and Eastern societies.

## Method

### Data and measures

We used the data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Program for International Student Assessment (OECD PISA, 2009), which includes 92,325 students from 11 societies: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, and USA (Western Anglo cultures); and Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Shanghai, South Korea, and Taipei (Eastern Confucian Asian cultures) (Gupta, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). There were 59,513 students from Western and 32,812 from Eastern cultures; 46,006 were females and 46,319 were males, with a mean age of 15.77 ( $SD = 0.29$ ) years.

We categorized items from PISA questionnaire into classroom contexts that support needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. All items were measured on a 4-point scale, with higher ratings indicating greater endorsement (see Table 1 for the items and reliability of the measure). Achievement was operationalized as reading achievement scores, which were scaled to have a mean of 500 ( $SD = 100$ ) (OECD, 2012).

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for basic psychological need support.

			Western Culture		Eastern Culture	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Relatedness</b>	ST34Q01	I get along well with most of my teachers	3.08	.67	2.95	.63
	ST34Q02	Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being	2.90	.68	2.62	.73
	ST34Q03	Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say	2.80	.72	2.64	.72
	ST34Q04	If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers	3.07	.65	2.92	.66
	ST34Q05	Most of my teachers treat me fairly	3.03	.66	2.85	.70
	Overall		2.98	.67	2.80	.69
	Cronbach's Alpha		.87		.83	
<b>Autonomy</b>	ST37Q03	The teacher gives students enough time to think about their answers	2.83	.82	2.58	.83
	ST37Q05	The teacher encourages students to express their opinion about a text	2.76	.88	2.36	.85
	ST37Q06	The teacher helps students relate the stories they read to their lives	2.25	.93	2.26	.86
	ST37Q07	The teacher shows students how the information in texts builds on what they already know.	2.54	.87	2.30	.85
	Overall		2.60	.87	2.38	.85
Cronbach's Alpha			.78		.77	
<b>Competence</b>	ST38Q01	The teacher explains beforehand what is expected of the students	2.92	.88	2.16	.83
	ST38Q02	The teacher checks that students are concentrating while working on the < reading assignment	2.88	.83	2.50	.86
	ST38Q03	The teacher discusses students' work, after they have finished the < reading assignment >	2.80	.85	2.32	.92
	ST38Q04	The teacher tells students in advance how their work is going to be judged	2.93	.88	2.51	.93
	ST38Q05	The teacher asks whether every student has understood how to complete the < reading assignment >	2.95	.88	2.44	.89
	ST38Q09	The teacher tells students how well they did on the < reading assignment > immediately after	2.47	.92	2.15	.87
	Overall		2.83	.87	2.35	.88
	Cronbach's Alpha		.82		.76	

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