



Motivation profiles at work: A self-determination theory approach



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ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory proposes that individuals experience distinct types of motivation to varying degrees. While it is well documented that these types of motivation differentially predict outcomes, very little attention has been paid to how they interact within individuals. The current study addresses the simultaneous occurrence of multiple motivation types within individual workers by adopting a person-centered approach on two samples of employees from different countries ($n = 723$ & 286). Four very similar motivation profiles were found across samples, representing balanced motivation, amotivated, autonomously regulated and highly motivated employees. In Sample 1, governmental employees presented a greater likelihood of membership in the least desirable amotivated profile. In Sample 2, autonomously and highly motivated profiles showed superior work performance and higher levels of wellbeing, while the amotivated profile fared the worst. The presence of external regulation in a profile appears unimportant when combined with autonomous forms of motivation, and detrimental to outcomes in the absence of autonomous forms of motivation. These results support the hypothesis that autonomous forms of motivation are far more important in promoting positive workplace outcomes than more controlling forms.

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Motivation, generally defined as the energy, direction and persistence of behavior (Pinder, 1998), is an inherently complex concept as evidenced by the variety of approaches to its conceptualization and measurement. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers a well-supported conceptualization which proposes that motivation is best represented by conceptually distinct, yet complementary, types of behavioral regulations experienced by individuals to varying degrees. While it is now well documented that these types of regulation differentially predict outcomes (e.g., Koestner & Losier, 2002), very little attention has been paid to how they interact within individuals. The current study addresses the simultaneous occurrence of multiple behavioral regulations within individual workers by adopting a person-centered approach to work motivation. While variable-centered analyses, which have dominated the field so far, have been extremely useful in their own right, the complexity of interactions between numerous types of motivation cannot easily be examined using traditional regression techniques, which become almost impossible to interpret when more than three interacting variables are simultaneously considered. No such limit exists when person-centered analyses are used to assess how configurations of motivation factors are organized within individuals.

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This shift to a person-centered strategy is more than just a shift in methods. It involves a fundamentally different way of thinking about motivation which may affect the design of interventions (Zyphur, 2009). When conceptualizing types of motivation as variables, we are not thinking about a whole person, but about one of the many components that make up a person's motivational profile. Resulting interventions are designed to increase one type of motivation (e.g., intrinsic) without taking into consideration how the intervention will impact the other types of motivation (e.g., extrinsic). Such an omission may well make interventions less effective. In contrast, the person-centered approach takes into account the interplay between a person's motives, and consequently may lead to interventions aiming to influence the person's whole motivational profile. This is likely to produce better tailored and cost efficient interventions for particular subpopulations of employees (Morin & Marsh, 2015). In practice, this approach would make SDT more compatible with how people in positions of authority, such as managers, actually think about the motivation of their employees (Morin, Morizot, Boudrias, & Madore, 2011; Zyphur, 2009).

As reviewed below, a few attempts have been made to conceptualize work motivation profiles. The present study, however, does so more comprehensively by: (a) including all types of regulation proposed by SDT (unlike Van den Broeck, Lens, De Witte, & Van Coillie, 2013), (b) using two large heterogeneous samples of workers from two countries (unlike Graves, Cullen, Lester, Ruderman, & Gentry, 2015) and, (c) utilizing the latest advances in latent profile analysis (unlike Moran, Diefendorff, Kim, & Liu, 2012 and Van den Broeck et al., 2013). As such it represents an incremental advancement in this area of research and potentially provides a more accurate representation of the types of profiles that are likely to be found in the work domain. Furthermore, it extends previous research by demonstrating how the relative frequency of the profiles differs across job categories (white collar, blue collar, governmental), and the relation between the profiles and a variety of outcomes, including in-role and extra-role performance, engagement, burnout, and job satisfaction.

1. Self-determination theory

SDT conceptualizes motivation as multiple distinguishable facets, each representing a different form of behavioral regulation, and assumed to follow a continuum of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné & Deci, 2005). At one extreme, intrinsic motivation occurs when an individual participates in an activity for the enjoyment inherent in the activity itself, while at the other extreme extrinsic motivation occurs when behaviors are enacted for an instrumental reason. SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation can be internalized to become autonomously regulated. Identified regulation, an internalized form of extrinsic motivation, occurs when an individual elects to act because the behavior or the outcome of the behavior is of personal significance. Identified regulation and intrinsic motivation, are autonomous forms of motivation, while the next two regulations are controlled forms of motivation. Introjected regulation, an internalized yet controlled form of extrinsic motivation, occurs when behaviors are undertaken in order to avoid negative self-feelings such as shame, or to attain positive self-feelings such as pride. External regulation, a non-internalized form of extrinsic motivation lying at the lower end of the continuum, occurs when behaviors are undertaken for externally derived rewards or punishments. The most current conceptualization of workplace motivation suggests that external regulation is best described through two components, external-social, and external-material (Gagné et al., 2015). External-social regulation is characterized by the desire to gain approval or respect from others, or to avoid criticism, whereas external-material regulation focuses on material rewards, and the avoidance of losing one's job.

Finally, amotivation is the absence of any desire to exert effort. Amotivation has been defined as a state in which individuals do not associate a behavior with subsequent outcomes, and as such, behaviors are executed for reasons unknown or not executed at all (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Accordingly, amotivated individuals are likely to feel detached from their actions, or may feel a lack of control over their present situation or behavior, and will therefore invest little time or energy towards such behaviors. This state was shown to be associated with a wide range of negative workplace outcomes including lower vitality, job satisfaction, affective commitment, adaptivity, proactivity, and job effort, as well as greater emotional exhaustion, burnout, and turnover intention (Gagné et al., 2015; Tremblay, Blanchard, Taylor, Pelletier, & Villeneuve, 2009). Thus, given that people are still enacting work behaviors despite their lack of motivation, and considering the notable negative consequences associated with amotivated behavior, it is our contention that amotivation is an important feature of the self-determination continuum to consider.

In addition to the empirical evidence demonstrating the negative influence of amotivation on performance and wellbeing, on a more theoretical point, a complete depiction of the continuum of motivation should not only include a variety of motives for engaging in specific behaviors (ranging from the intrinsic pleasure to external constraints) but also the complete lack of motive to engage in these behaviors (which forms the opposite pole of the self-determination continuum). This representation of the SDT continuum has been recently supported in the work area by a recent study by Howard, Gagné, Morin, and Forest (2016), in which it was found that amotivation is located along the same continuum as the behavioral regulations, with no evidence of discontinuity.

While there is ongoing debate concerning the presence of this continuum beyond a mere heuristic tool (Chemolli & Gagné, 2014), this research will examine whether the pattern of regulations expected from this continuum hypothesis is present in employee profiles. Specifically, support for the continuum hypothesis would be demonstrated if profiles follow a smooth increase/decrease in the level of the different regulations as a function of their position on the continuum. Alternatively, weak support would be found through the presence of profiles in which people experience similar levels of regulations assumed to be located at opposite poles of the continuum (e.g., intrinsic and external regulations; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

So far, substantial research has examined how these regulations relate to various antecedents and outcomes. Results generally demonstrate that intrinsic motivation and identified regulation yield more positive outcomes, such as productivity and retention, than introjected and external regulations (Gagné, 2014; Gagné & Deci, 2005), though some research has found differences in the

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