



# Greater autonomous regulation, wellbeing, and adaptive learning characteristics: The benefits of an effortful rather than expedient epistemic style

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## ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the extent to which an orientation towards complex, effortful thinking (i.e., Intellectual Position; IP) rather than effortless, expedient thinking (i.e., Default Position; DP) contributes to greater autonomous regulation in life in general ( $N = 376$ ), and for academic study ( $N = 697$ ). In both studies, respondents characterised by having comparatively higher levels of IP than DP reported greater intrinsic motivation than respondents who scored comparatively higher on DP. Subsequent regression analyses generally indicated that reduced amotivation and controlled regulation, and greater autonomous regulation and intrinsic motivation, were associated with greater wellbeing (i.e., vitality, life satisfaction) and adaptive learning characteristics (i.e., academic engagement, self-directed learning). An orientation towards IP rather than DP significantly accounted for variance in higher scores on self-directed learning, and lower levels of life satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper will, for the first time, use the construct of epistemic style (Eigenberger, Critchley, & Sealander, 2007) to explore whether having a habitual, effortful thinking style is likely to result in greater wellbeing (i.e., vitality, life satisfaction) and adaptive learning characteristics (i.e., academic engagement, self-directed learning). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), self-directed motivation and greater wellbeing are associated with harmoniously integrating one's beliefs and desires with social demands. As a result of living in civilised society, behavior is often impelled by external requirements, such as rules, laws, and social norms. The more an individual understands and internalizes external demands, the greater their autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2012; Weinstein, Ryan, & Deci, 2012). Similarly, Gare (1996) suggests that 'indwelling', a process of enquiry to understand the world, is an important part of a meaningful and volitional engagement in one's culture. Additionally, eudaimonia (i.e., a process of 'living well') involves a thorough understanding of how one fits into broader society (Aristotle, 1954). Thus, individuals who have a habitual tendency to think about, and consider aspects of life in a complex manner may be more able to internalise external, socially-created demands, contributing to greater autonomy and better personal outcomes.

Internalization occurs on a spectrum from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. Amotivation involves no motivation or understanding to guide behavior. Next, controlled regulation comprises external (i.e., to obtain rewards or avoid punishment), and introjected (e.g., to avoid negative feelings such as guilt from not meeting the expectations of others) regulation. Greater internalization results in autonomous regulation; identified (i.e., understanding that a particular behavior is important), and integrated (i.e., because a behavior accords with one's sense of self) regulation. Intrinsic motivation involves behavior which is guided by inherent enjoyment or satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Autonomous regulation and intrinsic motivation have consistently been found to promote greater wellbeing (see Deci & Ryan, 2012 for a review). In educational settings, greater autonomy is associated with increased enjoyment in study and higher grades (Black & Deci, 2000), reduced likelihood of dropping out of study (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992), and greater engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012). Autonomous regulation is important, as higher education institutions are under pressure to improve student retention and course completion (e.g., Astin, 1999; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

## 2. Epistemic style

In accordance with the notion that thinking, understanding, and evaluation is required to autonomously regulate external, socially-created demands (e.g., Aristotle, 1954; Gare, 1996; Weinstein et al.,

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2012), the dual-processing construct of epistemic style (Eigenberger et al., 2007) also suggests that there are benefits associated with effortful thinking. Epistemic style comprises two habitual approaches to problem solving or forming judgements; Intellectual Position (IP; a preference for complex, elaborative thinking) and Default Position (DP; a preference for expedient and effortless thinking). Eigenberger et al. (2007) suggest that people with higher levels of IP have a greater capacity for critical thought and the ability to manage complex ethical, social, and interpersonal problems, even if those issues are uncomfortable or not in one's interests. Accordingly, higher levels of IP were associated with a desire for analytical, open, and reflective thinking. DP was associated with cognitive closure, dogmatism, and anti-intellectualism (Eigenberger et al., 2007).

Eigenberger et al. (2007) also found that higher IP and lower DP were associated with greater Need For Cognition (NFC; i.e., greater enjoyment of complex thinking; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). In accordance with the notion that complex thinking may facilitate greater internalization, higher NFC scores have been associated with greater autonomous motivation for learning and intellectual engagement (Woo, Harms, & Kuncel, 2007).

### 3. Aims and hypotheses

It is expected that individuals who report higher comparative levels of IP than DP will report higher levels of autonomous regulation in life in general, and for academic study. Higher levels of autonomous regulation are expected to be associated with greater wellbeing (i.e., higher vitality, life satisfaction) and more adaptive learning characteristics (i.e., greater academic engagement and self-directed learning). The unique influence of epistemic style on these outcomes was also explored.

For example, as vitality is form of organismic wellbeing associated with the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Ryan & Frederick, 1997), epistemic style may not significantly explain variance in vitality over and above that provided by forms of autonomous regulation. In contrast, as life satisfaction involves an assessment of one's life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), epistemic style may be a significant contributor. The direction of this relationship was also explored.

Finally, epistemic style may not significantly contribute variance to academic engagement, which may instead be largely due to the influence of autonomous motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Jang et al., 2012). However, as self-directed learning involves seeking out resources, creating learning goals, implementing learning strategies, and self-evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975), it may be influenced by having a greater orientation towards IP than DP.

**Table 1**  
Gender, age, and educational backgrounds of respondents in all samples.

	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3
<i>Gender</i>			
Males	60	98	292
Females	118	101	405
Minimum age	19	22	18
Maximum age	52	89	67
$M_{age}(SD)$	24.26 (8.04)	56.26 (13.43)	23.72 (7.85)
<i>Education</i>			
Complete undergraduate	4%	18%	–
Complete postgraduate	3%	18%	–
Incomplete undergraduate	93%	1%	100%
Incomplete postgraduate	–	3%	–
Vocational training	–	30%	–
High school graduate	–	17%	–
Incomplete high school	–	13%	–

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Three samples were collected as part of larger studies. Table 1 displays demographic information including gender, age, and educational attainment.

#### 4.1.1. Study 1

Two samples, Sample 1 (i.e., undergraduates) and Sample 2 (i.e., general public) were combined in Study 1, resulting in a sample of  $N = 376$ . All respondents were Australian citizens and had been residing in Australia for at least five years. The samples were combined to examine a diverse, representative range of IP and DP scores. A justification for combining these samples is in the Results.

#### 4.1.2. Study 2

Sample 3 ( $N = 697$ ) comprised of first ( $n = 353$ ), second ( $n = 189$ ), and third ( $n = 155$ ) year undergraduate students at a metropolitan university in Australia. Students were studying on-campus within a faculty of business and economics ( $n = 148$ ), arts and humanities ( $n = 321$ ), science and engineering ( $n = 189$ ), or studying via online correspondence ( $n = 39$ ).

### 4.2. Procedure

#### 4.2.1. Study 1

Sample 1 included first year undergraduate students in psychology who completed the survey to receive course credit. Sample 2 had previously completed a nation-wide telephone survey and consented to participate in additional research. Both subsamples anonymously completed an online survey at a time and place of their choosing.

#### 4.2.2. Study 2

Respondents voluntarily completed an online survey to receive feedback on their academic skills and motivation as part of a program which aims to enhance student retention. All first and second year students were emailed with information about the study. Information was also left in areas of the campus with high levels of foot traffic.

## 5. Materials

### 5.1. Epistemic style

#### 5.1.1. Study 1

The Epistemic Preference Indicator (EPI; Eigenberger et al., 2007) includes 18 paired-stems, comprising an introductory statement (e.g., "In discussions...") with two answers representing each of IP ("I enjoy exploring ethical and philosophical problems I find in the world around me") and DP ("I become impatient when people turn simple questions of right and wrong into complex ethical issues"). Responses to each are measured on a five-point scale (1 = Disagree, 5 = Agree). Both subscales (IP:  $\alpha = .76$ , DP:  $\alpha = .71$ ) were adequately reliable, which was lower than that reported by Eigenberger et al. (2007; IP:  $\alpha = .91$ , DP:  $\alpha = .90$ ).

#### 5.1.2. Study 2

The Epistemic Preference Indicator-Revised (EPI-R; Elphinstone, Farrugia, Critchley, & Eigenberger, 2014) comprises eight items measured on a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Four items measure IP and four items measure DP. The IP subscale was adequately reliable ( $\alpha = .78$ ), however reliability for DP ( $\alpha = .60$ ) was lower. This is roughly in line with previous research (e.g., IP:  $\alpha = .79$ , .72, DP:  $\alpha = .72$ , .74; Elphinstone et al., 2014).

Eigenberger et al. (2007) suggest that IP and DP are distinct but related constructs, with individuals having a general preference for either IP or

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