

# Autonomous Motivation: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Montessori Method

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## Project Objectives

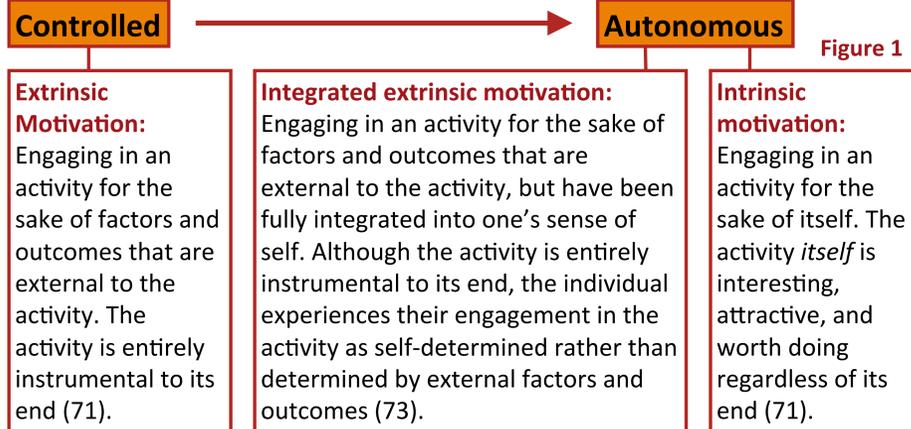
The main goal of this project is to provide connections between the central concepts of Montessorian pedagogy and those of SDT. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Help Montessorians to see how empirically grounded features of SDT support (and can help refine) their pedagogies.
2. Demonstrate how conceptual distinctions in Montessori's thought can support and push SDT research in new directions.
3. Provide a strong theoretical foundation for that research.

## What is Self-Determination Theory?

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** is an theory of motivation posited by psychologists Ryan and Deci (68). SDT depicts motivation on a continuum from controlled to autonomous (see Fig. 1).

- **Controlled motivation** is engaging in an activity because one feels externally pressured or compelled to act. One therefore perceives the cause of their actions to be located *outside* of themselves.
- **Autonomous motivation** is engaging in an activity because the act has been chosen and determined by one's own self. One therefore perceives the cause of their actions to be located *within* themselves.



### The Three Basic Psychological Needs

SDT posits that satisfaction of the following three needs facilitates autonomous motivation (Gagné and Deci 334).

- **Autonomy** is feeling free to choose, endorse, and regulate one's actions.
- **Relatedness** is feeling connected to other people.
- **Competence** is feeling confident and skilled with respect to both internal and external environments.

### Benefits of Autonomous Motivation

- Enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity.
- Heightened vitality, self-esteem, and general well-being.
- Increased tendency to act with more interest, excitement, and confidence (Ryan and Deci 69).

## Montessori and Self-Determination Theory

Montessori and SDT are both committed to the claim that **autonomous motivation characterizes optimal human development and psychological health**. What Montessori calls 'normalization' and 'self-perfection' include as a central component the autonomous motivation posited by SDT.

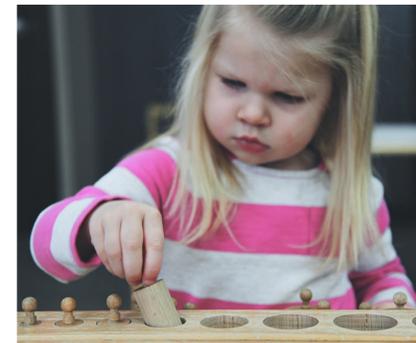
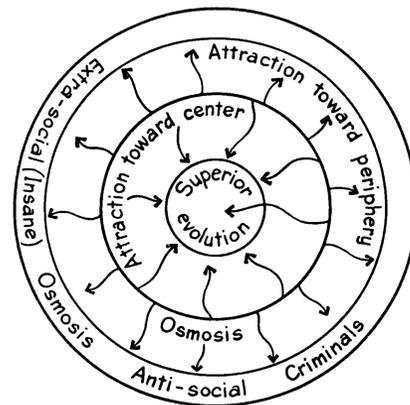
Further, although she uses different terms, autonomy, relatedness, and competence characterize the educational environment and normalized children as described by Montessori.

**Normalization, Intrinsic Motivation, and Self-Perfection:** Montessori describes normalization as the psychologically normal motivational orientation towards engaging with work for the sake of itself (Absorbent 186-188). Normalization occurs when children intensely concentrate and spontaneously work on an interesting activity for the sake of itself (Advanced 53-54). Normalized children are therefore intrinsically motivated to work (see Fig. 3). Further, normalized children perfect themselves through their work, which reflects Montessori's broader claim that the intrinsically motivated work of adults actualizes the perfection of civilization (Absorbent 190-195, see Fig. 2).

**The Work of the Child and the Work of the Adult:** Although the adult's work is intrinsically motivated, this work is different from the child's in that it is engaged in for the sake of its end. For example, an inventor works because he finds inventing itself "fascinating and irresistible" and because the *end* of his work (i.e. his invention) raises civilization higher (Secret 186-187). Given that SDT does not differentiate between these two kinds of intrinsic motivation, future research ought to trace the development of the adult's intrinsic motivation during the adolescent plane.

**Integrated Extrinsic Motivation:** Montessori discusses integrated extrinsic motivation in regards to Admiral Byrd, an impoverished explorer who begged for the money to fund his expedition to the South Pole. Although begging was instrumental to discovering the South Pole, it appears that this activity was integrated into Byrd's personal goal structure and sense of self (Absorbent 195). It is therefore likely that begging was a case of integrated extrinsic motivation. Beyond suggesting that money making is vital for adolescents (Adolescence 64-65), Montessori offers little insight regarding how to cultivate this kind of motivation—an issue that Montessorians ought to consider.

**Figure 2**  
In Montessori's diagram of humanity, self-perfecting individuals are autonomously motivated, while people in the outer rings display controlled motivation (Absorbent 192-193).



**Figure 3**  
Intrinsic motivation is characterized by intense focus on one's work.

## Directions for Future Empirical Research

Given the conceptual links between Montessori's pedagogy and SDT, there is prima facie reason to expect that children in Montessori classrooms are autonomously motivated, and are particularly capable of meeting the basic needs posited by SDT. Montessori classrooms would therefore be an optimal environment in which to conduct SDT research. This research could be utilized by both Montessorians and psychologists to improve and refine their respective accounts of motivation and development. Given Montessori's claim that the teacher is also a scientist (Discovery 4-8), this empirical research ought to be conducted by Montessori teachers. As a start, I suggest the following research topics:

1. Investigating whether the intrinsically motivated work of the child and the adult are indeed different, and observing how the adult's intrinsic motivation develops during adolescence.
2. Examining how integrated extrinsic motivation can be cultivated in (or before) the adolescent plane.
3. Determining whether the need for competence is satisfied by *perceiving* one's self as competent.

## The Three Needs Characterize the Montessori Environment

### Autonomy and Freedom

- The educational environment should remove children from the external control of adults, and provide them with the freedom to choose their own work (Absorbent 187, Rome 75-76).
- This supports autonomy by allowing children to choose and endorse their own actions.

### Relatedness and the Teacher

- The teacher should be an attractive figure that supports the child's development through careful observation and the precise modeling of behavior (Advanced 110).
- The teacher should therefore provide the child with a sense of relatedness in the classroom.
- Limited number of works cultivates respect, cooperation, and relatedness between peers (Absorbent 203-204).

### Competence and the Prepared Environment

- The classroom and the works are suited to the child's size and abilities (Advanced 117-118), allowing the child to gain and experience competence by pursuing and mastering his own work.
- All works have a control of error that allows children to feel competent because their success is indicated by the works themselves (Absorbent 226-229).

## The Three Needs Characterize Normalized Children

### Autonomy and Self-Discipline

- Normalized children exhibit what Montessori calls spontaneous discipline (Absorbent 184).
- This capacity to self-regulate one's engagement with work shows that normalized children act with autonomy.

### Relatedness and Social Cohesion

- Normalized children respect the work of others and treat others with grace and courtesy (203-204, Discovery 49).
- From this respect emerges "cohesion in the social unit" (212-218), in which children work as a collective towards the perfection of their entire group.
- For example, older children often help younger children and teach them new works (206-207)
- Both respect and social cohesion illustrate that normalized children are intimately related to their peers.

### Competence and Joy

- When children have mastered a work they display "lively joy" which indicates "internal growth" (Advanced 72).
- Joy demonstrates that normalized children perceive themselves as competent *because* they are genuinely becoming more skilled in their work.
- Note that SDT's account of competence is merely the *perception* of competence.