Self-Determination Theory in Adventure Education

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation in Adventure Education is of interest to facilitators for various reasons. Understanding the reasons as to why people will undertake challenges and how to motivate someone in severe environments can be the difference between life and death. Boniface (2000) looks at how people are motivated when taking part in adventurous activities and states that adventurous activities provide experiences that are intrinsically engrossing. This review aims to consider Deci and Ryan’s (2000, 2008) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a motivational theory that has been linked to sport and exercise, education and mental health. Due to minimal academic research it seems as though the theory is yet to be fully applied to Adventure Education. This study will look at the advantages and disadvantages within the theory and its application to Adventure Education.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a motivational humanistic theory of basic psychological needs. These needs are autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is the need to be able to internalise the choices of the chosen activity, which means the activity must be of interest to the participant and be progressive. Competence is the overall ability and confidence in one’s ability. Finally, relatedness is the social environment within the activity and support of others involved within the activity. SDT differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and includes five smaller theories to explain adherence and mental well-being. However this study will only focus on two of the theories in depth: Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) which explains intrinsic motivation and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), which differentiates the different forms of extrinsic motivation.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) states that in order for a person to be able to develop and adhere to the activity they must first satisfy the basic psychological needs. CET also describes how external and controlling behaviour or environments can thwart intrinsic motivation. OIT states that there are four different types of extrinsic motivation depending on how they internalise the goal (Deci and Ryan 2008). See figure 1 for model of Self-Determination Theory, representing the two smaller theories.

According to Deci and Ryan (2008) SDT’s strengths lie in its broad scope which encompasses a wide range of phenomena and its application across varied cultures and in many life domains (Ryan & Deci 2000). SDT can be applied to life domains by internalising the goals and therefore becoming autonomous in the domain which will increase performance. In contrast one limitation of the theory is that it assumes that everyone has a willingness to develop and that it is the facilitator’s task to evoke the inherent motivation (Vlisvirkstė & Sheldon 2006). Deci and Ryan (2008) suggest that in order to be autonomous and adhere to the domain, the aforementioned basic psychological needs must be satisfied. In providing support for each need, the person will internalise the behaviour (Deci, Patrick, Williams & Ryan 2009) without reward or extrinsic. They state that in order to support competence, it is not only the effectiveness and the history within the domain but also the social environment. This means that a facilitator can increase the confidence of a participant by considering these factors, planning their approach accordingly and enforcing positive feedback, ultimately increasing competence.

In order to support autonomy (internalisation), a person must be uncontrolled, meaning that choices must be solely theirs. Deci et al (2009) explain that the provision of a controlled environment that focuses on punishment of rewards is more likely to make a participant feel emotionally drained. They also state that warmth, care and involvement others convey support relatedness. This proposes that the participant is more likely to internalise the goal. Other studies have indicated that SDT can be applied to many areas, including: different cultures, education, family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, medical health, mental health, workplace, sport and leisure.

Niemiec & Ryan (2009), review SDT in education, they suggest that classroom practices that support students’ satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with both greater intrinsic motivation and autonomous types of extrinsic motivation. After reviewing studies across schools, colleges and universities and considering teachers within different cultures, Niemiec & Ryan, (2009), drew upon previous research which indicates strategies that support and satisfy the three needs mentioned above within a classroom setting. Whereas, Deci & Ryan (2008), Deci, Patrick, Williams & Ryan (2009) and Wilson, Mack & Grattan (2008) all relate physical exercise outside of the classroom to SDT. This is interesting to this study as the adventure industry can often be psychically demanding. Deci & Ryan (2008) review many studies on SDT in sport and exercise as well as other life domains and note that individuals who receive autonomy support gain a positive increase on motivation, performance and well being. The final paper by Waihe, Ang, Teo-Koh & Kahid (2004) links outdoor education to SDT, however one limitation of this research is its minimal academic material based on outdoor and Adventure Education. This study showed that the principles of SDT could be extended to outdoor education. It also suggests that no outdoor education program itself may not be coerced upon students, instead they should be given free choice as to which activities they take part in. In doing this, Wang et al (2004) note that greater rewards can be reaped.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After reviewing literature on SDT and how it could be applied to Adventure Education, there are both positive and negative aspects of the theories that need further consideration. Firstly, SDT can be a useful tool to help understand motivation and to predict adherence (Wilson, Mack & Grattan, 2008) within the adventure industry in both individual and group motivation (Wang, Ang, Teo-Koh & Kahid, 2004).

Facilitating a goal that will allow people to be autonomously motivated whether intrinsically or extrinsically, can be achieved by supporting the basic psychological needs (Deci, Patrick, Williams & Ryan 2009).

Wang et al (2004), notes that students should not be coerced in to activities they do not want to take part in and this supports autonomy, one of the basic psychological needs. However, in the adventure industry, supporting autonomy is not always viable when goals need to be met or the environment does not allow the decision or choices to be made by the person. In these cases, a controlling teaching style is required for the safety of the participant. As well as limitations of supporting autonomy, there are also issues with regards to supporting relatedness. When relatedness is supported, an individual in a team or group may lose autonomy because they disagree with decisions of the group (Deci, Patrick, Williams & Ryan 2009). This means that in an adventure setting or an ‘off the peg’ residential activity, autonomy cannot always be facilitated. On the other hand, Deci & Ryan (2008) suggest that by supporting competence and relatedness with Organismic Integration Theory, a person can internalize the goal and be autonomously extrinsically motivated. In addition to facilitating autonomy extrinsically, it is possible to facilitate bespoke experiences supporting all basic psychological needs. Therefore SDT can be applied to Adventure Education.

CONCLUSION

Self-Determination Theory states that a persons’ motivation and willingness to develop will be increased, providing that they are interested in the activity and the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are satisfied. Within my own personal experiences I have discovered that there is external pressure from parents, teachers and facilitators to make students take part in adventurous residential activities. In doing so, students’ motivation may be disrupted. Students that choose to attend an adventure residential course themselves are likely to find themselves in an inclusive group of likeminded people whilst receiving support throughout their stay. In light of Self-Determination Theory, this will increase their motivation and ultimately ensure that they achieve highly.

REFERENCES

Boniface, M. R. (2000). Towards an understanding of flow and other positive experience phenomena within outdoor and adventurous activities. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 1(2), 57-68


Fig.1 Self-Determination Theory model (Deci and Ryan, 2008).