

# Exploring workers' experiences of behaviour regulation

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### Introduction

Self-determination theory (SDT) proposes a continuum of 5 forms of behaviour regulation from less to more autonomous: external (EX), introjected (IJ), identified (ID), integrated (IN) and intrinsic (IM)

There is a lack of consistency about which of the regulatory styles are deemed to exist in different domains. In organisational psychology, integration has largely been considered invalid. The dominance of quantitative methods also means that there are very few first hand accounts of the regulatory styles within the work context.

This research aims to explore:

1. How workers describe different forms of highly motivated behaviour at work
2. What emotions are experienced in relation to different forms of regulated behaviour

The key characteristics of each regulatory style, including the emotional experience, are summarised in the table below. This builds on the work of Koestner and Losier (2009), who did this for IM, ID and IJ in relation to educational aspirations and voting activity.

In addition to being able to map the experience of different forms of behaviour regulation, some key themes emerged from the data, which have implications for SDT research:

- The role of values in the internalisation process
- The experience of behaviour regulation over time

### Methods

Semi-structured interviews were done with 18 workers in a UK charity. The staff were all office based and the jobs that they performed were largely heuristic.

Respondents were asked to focus on specific events where they had worked hard on a task at work that day. They were asked to describe why they had worked hard on it and how they felt about it. 6 incidents for each participant were captured and analysed, 108 in total.

Template analysis was used to identify the key themes and concepts emerging from the data. An initial template was developed from literature review and pilot interviews. The template evolved throughout the coding process

Quotes from the interviews are used here to illustrate the key points

### Relationship between types of regulation

#### Identified and Integrated

ID and IN can be differentiated in this sample, which is different to what has previously been supposed in work-based SDT, and has implications for how regulation is measured in organisational psychology. The main differences are:

- The proximity of values to the individual – with IN they are fully self-determined and ID are merely accepted
- The emotional experience – IN is experienced much more consistently positive, whereas the experience of ID is largely neutral, because the individual does not associate with the task in the same way
- Motivation by IN is more stable than ID – ID is dependent on the benefit or importance of the task continuing whereas IN is linked to deeply held values and beliefs which are more stable



#### Intrinsic motivation

IM occurs for different reasons (having autonomy; doing something different; something tangible; something challenging; or because the task is always interesting) which have different characteristics.

The research draws into question whether all forms of intrinsic motivation are beneficial at work, because:

- Some forms of IM can be short-lived (to do something different)
- IM is not always directed toward active participation – tasks with intrinsic value may not help to “get the job done”

...it helps me to reflect on the meeting, which is important in my role as project manager

VS.

The reason I do my job is because I really believe in fair trade and ethical trade

There have been aspects of it that I probably researched a lot more thoroughly because I enjoyed them. I didn't really need to go into that much depth

Conceptual features	External (EX)	Introjection (IJ)	Identification (ID)	Integration (IN)	Intrinsic (IM)
<b>Emotional experience (focus of emotions)</b>	Negative (towards task)	Negative (avoidance) Positive (approach)	Neutral or Positive (towards outcomes)	Positive (towards outcomes)	Positive (towards task)
<b>Motivating force</b>	Reward & punishment	Compulsion	Personal importance or benefit	Values & beliefs	Attraction (interest)
<b>Regulatory guide</b>	External contingency (Learned)	Conditional self-regard (Learned)	Externally influenced values (Learned)	Self-determined values /part of identity (Learned)	Emergent emotions (Innate)
<b>Goal orientations</b>	Approach/avoidance	Approach/avoidance (conflicted)	Approach (long-term/outcome)	Approach (long-term/outcome)	Approach (short term/process)
<b>Stability</b>	Unstable – dependant on contingency	Unstable – linked to delicate ego	Somewhat stable – value of outcome fragile	Long-term stability – value is self-determined	Stable or unstable – depends on source of IM

#### The role of values

Self-determined values play a large part in workers internalising the reason for their motivation.

Values can support internalisation even if they are external, as long as they are self-determined (supporting Kasser, 2009)

Would values play such a part in internalisation in a non-values driven organisation?

I do think that [values] play a big part in doing some boring things at work



### Behaviour regulation over time

Less internalised extrinsic regulation (EX and IJ) appear to be relatively short term, ID slightly longer term and IN the longest term. Some forms of IM (IM because the task is new or different) are not stable at all – the interest in the task fades quickly



Someone told me to think bigger picture about where I want to go outside of here and gave me new ways to think about my work which helped to inspire me

It would be fun but...by the time I've worked on something for weeks I'm always a bit tired of it and want to move on

Where internalisation of the external value of a task takes place the passage of time is beneficial – previous experience and inspiration taken from the external environment are both in evidence as encouraging internalisation.

### Conclusions and Implications

All 5 of SDT's forms of behaviour regulation, including integration, are in evidence in this case. It would be interesting to explore other work environments for the existence of IN. This has implications for how the range of behaviour regulation is measured in organisational psychology.

Integration appears to be more valuable than intrinsic motivation in encouraging long term, positive motivation at work, where some IM behaviour might not be directed toward active participation. The implications of this for SDT research is that IM has always been seen as the most beneficial form of motivation to encourage optimal functioning in all life domains, so aggregate scores of autonomous motivation (the Relative Autonomy Index) are used in quantitative research. This might not be a valid measure in the work context.

Extrinsic values can encourage internalisation if they are self-determined – this may have implications on the impact of reward on motivation at work – if reward could be designed to be aligned with workers' values it could encourage internalisation.

More internalised forms of external regulation appear to be the most stable forms of regulation. IJ, EX and some forms of IM are more short lived. Experience over time helps individuals to internalise regulation.

### References

Koestner, R., & Losier, G. (2009) "Distinguishing Three Ways of Being Internally Motivated: A Closer Look at Introjection, Identification and Intrinsic Motivation." In *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*, University of Rochester Press.

Kasser, T. (2009). "Sketches for a Self-Determination Theory of Values" In *Handbook of Self-Determination Research* Univ. of Rochester Press.