

The Role of Awareness and Autonomy in Quieting the Ego: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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The ego has maintained a prominent status among psychological constructs since its initial popularization more than a century ago. A recent PsycINFO (<http://www.apa.org/psycinfo>) search, which returned 5,655 results to the key word *ego*, attests to the importance of the construct within myriad areas of study among theoretical and empirical psychologists. Furthermore, lay conceptualizations and uses of the ego are manifold, which underscores the strong influence of the ego on the current landscape of Western thought. It is interesting that most of these lay uses are pejorative (e.g., *egotist*, *egocentric*).

Among contemporary theories within psychology, however, the meanings and functional implications of the ego are divergent. Like the lay public's varying use of the term, many technical uses of the term *ego* focus on problematic personality styles or motivational states—being egotistical, ego involved, or having an inflated ego (Leary, 2004). However, some theorists (e.g., Freud, 1923/1960; Loevinger, 1976) posit that the ego is anything but problematic, that instead it is the basis of assimilation, growth, and harmony within the psyche. As an organ of awareness and integration, this use of the ego is defined essentially as the synthetic process of the mind (e.g., see McAdams, 1990) that plays an important and constructive role in adaptation and conflict resolution.

In this chapter we examine, using self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the relation of the ego to several types of motivated behavior that vary in the degree to which they are initiated with the experience of choice and volition. In brief, SDT suggests that autonomous self-regulation involves the reflective endorsement of behaviors and their integration with important needs and values, which we propose is associated with the quieting of the ego. In contrast, introjected behavioral regulation involves the initiation and maintenance of behaviors through internally controlling motivational states, such as ego-involvement and self-esteem concerns. Moreover, introjection is characterized by a lack of integrative awareness, which precludes

the ability to synthesize these behaviors with preexisting psychic material and therefore stalls the process of quieting the ego. As such, from the perspective of SDT, the regulation of a behavior through introjection is closely associated with a “noisy” ego: Both involve restricted awareness, the administration of controlling contingencies, and defensive responding when threatened. Considerable empirical evidence from SDT suggests that introjected behavioral regulation has deleterious consequences for both psychological health and motivation, whereas autonomous self-regulation is conducive to well-being, higher quality interpersonal relationships, and motivated behavior. In the paragraphs that follow, we briefly review relevant theory and research and then proceed to discuss how reflective awareness (Ryan, 2005), and specifically mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; see also chap. 7, this volume), underpin autonomous self-regulation and the integrative functions of the psyche that are associated with inner harmony and the capacity to quiet the ego.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT is an approach to self-regulation and personality development that rests on an organismic-dialectic metatheory in which humans are viewed as vulnerable to control and passivity as well as capable of choice, growth, and authenticity. SDT proposes that biological, developmental, and social factors have both proximal and distal influences on the development of *autonomy*—the experience of reflective self-endorsement of activity that occurs at both the inner and outer boundaries—that in turn affects behavioral regulation, personality integration, and life-span development. Thus, the primary focus of investigation within SDT has centered on motivation, which is bifurcated into two types (viz., intrinsic and extrinsic) that have divergent consequences for healthy development and well-being (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review).

Motivation was classically formulated as a unitary concept that varied in amount instead of type (e.g., Hull, 1943). It became apparent, however, that motivation was a more dynamic concept than drive-based energy used to develop new associative bonds and that such a definition could not account for nonderivative (e.g., exploratory) behaviors. Deci (1975) used the concept of intrinsic motivation to account for behaviors that are performed in the absence of contingent rewards or punishments and thus are perceived as volitional. *Intrinsic motivation* refers to the natural tendency to seek out novel and challenging situations, to expand cognitive and behavioral capacities, and to explore the inner and outer environment. Moreover, the maintenance and enhancement of intrinsic motivation rely on satisfaction of the psychological needs for autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Within SDT, intrinsic motivation is considered to be an evolved, inner resource that supports the development of new skills and competencies, as well as a source of fun and vitality (Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997).

Young children typically have ample opportunity to engage in intrinsically motivated activities (e.g., play). As people grow older and venture into the broader social milieu, however, they more often spend their time fulfilling social duties and obligations. This type of motivation, in which the behavior

is performed to obtain outcomes that are separable from the activities themselves, is termed *extrinsic motivation*. It is important to note that although these behaviors are not spontaneously initiated, extrinsic motivation can vary in the degree to which the behavior is enacted volitionally (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Organismic-integration theory, a subtheory within SDT, proposes that extrinsic motivation exists along a continuum of relative autonomy and suggests that, through the process of internalization, extrinsically motivated behaviors can be regulated more or less volitionally. The least autonomous form of behavioral regulation, termed *external regulation*, refers to behavior that is enacted to obtain rewards or to avoid punishments and is experienced as relatively controlled because the impetus for action exists outside the person. An example of external regulation is a student who studies to obtain parental rewards or to avoid punishments. Once internalized, behavioral regulation occurs through *introjection*, in which behavior is enacted to garner pride and esteem or to avoid guilt and shame and, like external regulation, is experienced as relatively controlled because, even though the origin of the behavior is inside the person, it is external to the self. An example of introjection is a student who is driven to study to avoid feelings of guilt or to feel pride and ego inflation associated with success and high performance.

As internalization proceeds toward greater autonomy, self-regulation occurs through *identification*, in which the value of the behavior is understood, is considered to be important for the individual, and is experienced as relatively autonomous because it is self-endorsed and volitionally enacted. An example of identification is a student who studies because he considers it worthwhile to do so. The process of internalization is completed when behavior is regulated through *integration*, in which the identified regulation is brought into coherence and harmony with other identifications and aspects of the self and thus is experienced as relatively autonomous. An example of integration is a student who studies because she defines herself as someone who considers learning to be important and who has aligned this value with other personally endorsed values.

A Deeper Examination of Introjection

SDT proposes that humans have an inherent tendency toward psychological synthesis through the internalization of social regulations and values and their integration with preexisting self-structures to form a coherent and unified sense of self. Moreover, environmental supports (e.g., parents, teachers) for the satisfaction of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitate fuller internalization (viz., identification and integration) and higher well-being in a variety of domains and across the life span (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review); that is, people are more likely to identify with the value of an external regulation and to make it their own when they experience provision for the satisfaction of their psychological needs, and such satisfaction contributes to psychological health (cf. Niemiec, Lynch, et al., 2006) across cultures, contexts, and age groups (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review).

Nonetheless, some of the most common forms of behavioral regulation are anything but harmonious, especially those that are described within SDT as *introjected*. Introjection involves the adoption of external regulations and values without really assimilating them. In a developmental sense, introjection typically results when socializers prompt behavior using contingent approval, essentially communicating to the socialized person, "I will love you only if you do as I say." This is experienced phenomenologically as having the satisfaction of the needs for relatedness and autonomy pitted against each other, which results in the experiences of internal compulsion, a lack of choice, and shame and guilt after failure (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Thus, introjection is likely to manifest among people who were exposed to a socialization strategy in which they were forced to decide between satisfaction of one psychological need at the expense of another, and this controlling practice is then applied to one's self. Therefore, through introjection, the person controls the self through the administration of contingent consequences in the forms of pride and self-esteem after adherence or success and guilt and shame after lapses or failure. Such controlled behavioral regulation has been found to be associated with a variety of negative consequences for motivation and well-being, including increased tension, anxiety, vulnerability, and depression (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review).

The experience of introjection is quite prevalent in contemporary society. Indeed, Deci and Ryan (1985) suggested that the process of organismic integration typically gets stalled at the level of introjection, which results in the development of various psychological conflicts and psychopathologies. Introjection is most commonly manifest in daily life as ego involvement and public self-consciousness. *Ego involvement* refers to an internally controlled motivational state in which success or failure at a task is considered to be an indicator of self-worth (Nicholls, 1984; Ryan, 1982). Ryan (1982) manipulated ego involvement by telling experimental participants that their performance on an intrinsically motivated task was a reflection of their creative intelligence and found that participants who were ego involved demonstrated less intrinsic motivation for the target activity. Public self-consciousness reflects people's tendency to be aware of themselves as objects of others' observation. Plant and Ryan (1985) found that dispositional and experimentally induced public self-consciousness had similarly deleterious effects on intrinsic motivation. These results converge to suggest that, although introjection—manifest as ego involvement and public self-consciousness—can involve a high level of behavioral responding (Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991), it undermines intrinsic motivation because of the accompanying feelings of internal pressure and negative affect.

Another common manifestation of introjection is *contingent self-esteem* (Deci & Ryan, 1995; see also chap. 6, this volume). Ryan and Brown (2003) suggested that the pursuit of self-esteem—characterized by a preoccupation with the enhancement of one's self-worth through the attainment of external indicators (e.g., accomplishment, appearance, status)—is derived from experiences with relational others (e.g., parents, teachers) who use contingent regard as a socializing technique. People who experience a high level of contingent self-esteem are theorized to have introjected the contingencies that their socializing agents displayed to them, and essentially push around different parts

of their psyche through the administration of contingent rewards (i.e., pride) and punishments (i.e., guilt and shame). Kernis and Paradise (2003) reported that contingent self-esteem is associated with a stronger anger response after an ego threat. Thus, when one's self-worth is considered to be dependent on external outcomes, indicating that behavior is regulated through introjection, then the pursuit of self-esteem is a costly endeavor (see chap. 8, this volume).

Finally, introjection is manifest in the seeking of self-esteem through the establishment and pursuit of particular life goals, or aspirations. Kasser and Ryan (1996) proposed that people's long-term aspirations are likely to fall into two general categories and found that the aspirations for money, fame, and an appealing image loaded onto one factor that they labeled *extrinsic aspirations*, whereas personal growth, interpersonal relationships, community contribution, and physical health loaded onto a second factor, labeled *intrinsic aspirations*. This factor structure appears to be common across cultures (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005). Kasser and Ryan found that the strength of people's intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations was positively associated with psychological health, and these findings have been replicated among a number of diverse cultural groups and across the life span (e.g., Ryan et al., 1999). Moreover, Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda (2005) found that people who emphasized intrinsic memories in their narrative autobiographical accounts tended to experience greater eudaimonic well-being. Recently, Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci (2006) found that, although intrinsic aspirations facilitated psychological health, the attainment of extrinsic aspirations made no contribution to well-being and actually heightened experiences of ill-being. Although introjection and the pursuit of extrinsic aspirations are theoretically distinguishable (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we consider the two concepts to be conceptually similar because they both involve attempts to bolster self-esteem through the attainment of external indicators of worth and involve pressured, internal control.

Introjection and the Ego

According to SDT, introjection represents a controlled form of behavioral regulation that is based largely on motives intended to protect the ego through the maintenance or enhancement of self-esteem (Ryan & Brown, 2003). Introjection differs from more autonomous forms of self-regulation because the latter are experienced as less pressured and conflictual and are associated with a perceived sense of self-endorsement and volition. When behavior is regulated through introjection, the ego can be characterized as noisy because it uses various defensive strategies to restrict awareness of those parts of experience that are forbidden or negatively regarded by the social world. The noisy ego uses controlling contingencies to maintain its harsh rule, such as the administration of contingent, self-conscious affect (e.g., shame, pride). Because introjection necessarily thwarts the satisfaction of autonomy, there is often an accompanying experience of coercive pressure and internal conflict. Indeed, success and failure at introjected standards have direct implications for self-esteem and the ego. When introjected standards (e.g., "I should be an A student") are met, this success yields an inflation of the ego and contingent

self-esteem. In contrast, when such standards are not met, the person is left to feel less worthy. Accordingly, introjection is associated with negative consequences for motivation, physical health, and psychological well-being (e.g., see Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006, for a review).

The Role of Awareness in Quieting the Ego

Because of the many problems associated with a noisy ego, it is important to consider ways to quiet the ego and thus to facilitate the process of internalization toward greater autonomy and self-congruent behavioral enactment. Deci and Ryan (1980, 1985) have suggested that awareness is necessary for the amelioration of introjection and for the development of flexible structures that facilitate unified, integrated functioning. Moreover, Hodgins and Knee (2002) suggested that the willingness to perceive reality with open, receptive awareness is associated with autonomy and reduced defensiveness when faced with threat, both of which are hallmarks of the quiet ego.

Recently, Brown and Ryan (2003, 2004, 2006) began a program of research centered on the motivational, affective, and behavioral correlates and consequences of *mindfulness*—a receptive state of present-centered awareness. Mindfulness is inherently a state of consciousness into and out of which people move, but there is evidence that reliable interindividual differences exist in the propensity to abide in mindful states over time. Several lines of evidence suggest that mindfulness is an important inner resource that facilitates less egoistic, more autonomous forms of self-regulation.

Brown and Ryan (2003) found, using both concurrent and prospective study designs, that dispositional mindfulness was positively associated with more autonomous self-regulation. Furthermore, Levesque and Brown (in press) found that dispositional mindfulness predicted higher day-to-day autonomous self-regulation and even modulated an implicit, nonconscious tendency to regulate behavior in a more egoistic way. Moreover, the benefits of mindfulness do not appear to be limited to those embodying the disposition. Brown and Ryan (2003) showed, using within-person diary data, that when in more mindful states, people were more likely to regulate their behavior autonomously. In addition, experimental evidence (Brown & Ryan, 2006) indicated that the induction of state mindfulness led to higher intrinsic motivation—interest and enjoyment—for a reading task and, subsequently, to better recall of the text material. Finally, Brown and Kasser (2005) found that more mindful people were more likely to endorse the importance of intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) aspirations. These results suggest that mindfulness fosters a motivational orientation marked by self-endorsed, noncontingent behavior and goal pursuits that reflect less egoistic functioning.

Thus far, we have characterized the noisy ego as being preoccupied with, and oriented toward, self-esteem enhancement through the use of various defensive motivational strategies that collectively fall under the rubric of introjection. Because the noisy ego is maintained contingently, it often needs to be defended when contingencies of self-worth are not obtained. Perhaps the greatest threat to the ego is its annihilation. Indeed, research in terror man-

agement theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) has demonstrated repeatedly that confrontation with personal mortality breeds responses that are focused on defensive self-esteem enhancement, for example, ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. If, however, as we suggest, awareness—and, more specifically, mindfulness—facilitates the quieting of the ego, then it is possible that mindfulness may reduce the defensive responding engendered by a noisy ego that is typically observed in response to mortality salience.

Recently, we (Niemiec, Brown, & Ryan, 2006) investigated the role of mindfulness in the processes involved in terror management. Participants were instructed to write about either their own death or an innocuous topic (i.e., watching television). After this, all participants were asked to read two essays purportedly written by foreigners, one who supported participants' cultural worldview by expressing pro-U.S. sentiments, and the other who opposed it, with the latter being an ego threat. Because people desire to feel like a valuable member of a meaningful existence when under existential threat (Greenberg et al., 1997), they often respond defensively to reminders of their death by expressing favoritism toward an outgroup (foreign) author who upholds the ingroup worldview and by derogating an author who opposes it. In a series of studies, we found that more mindful people in a mortality salience condition showed less defensive responding by reporting less ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. This effect was explained, in part, by more mindful people's calm emotional reaction to mortality salience, greater willingness to process the death experience for a longer amount of time, and less suppression of death-related thoughts. From the perspective of SDT, we propose that the defensive responses to mortality salience documented by research from terror management theory rely on the experience of having a noisy ego. Our results suggest that mindfulness, which encourages more receptive, less egoistic responding, helps discourage defensive responding when faced with existential threat.

Conclusion: Awareness, Autonomy, and the Quiet Ego

Using SDT, we have proposed that autonomous self-regulation has considerable value and yields a variety of salutary outcomes that are associated with the quieting of the ego. With relative freedom from the loud cries of egoistic demands, SDT proposes that autonomous self-regulation is more clearly guided by the core synthetic processes of the self that orient the organism toward greater internal psychic coherence, congruence with the social world, and satisfaction of the basic psychological needs. Thus, within SDT we interpret the quiet ego as being the basis of behavioral regulation that is truly self-determined, which facilitates the organismic tendencies toward growth and intra- and interpersonal harmony.

A considerable body of research indicates that autonomous self-regulation can be facilitated by appropriate social supports. In this chapter, we have shown that this motivational style can also be fostered by mindfulness, which represents an inner support for autonomous self-regulation that may operate synergistically with supportive social contexts to foster healthy forms of

motivation (Brown & Ryan, 2004). However, the capacity for mindfulness may be particularly important in social environments that encourage ego involvement instead of autonomous self-regulation. Such environments arguably are common in contemporary society, and the cultivation of mindfulness may help foster a way of being that would otherwise prove difficult. Indeed, the benefits to such an endeavor are manifold; without the defense, judgment, or esteem that make a noisy ego so problematic (Deci & Ryan, 1995), the individual whose functioning is self-congruent and has cultivated a quiet ego will be better able to pursue ends that truly satisfy.

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Transcending Self-Interest

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