

# PERSONAL AUTONOMY AS A KEY FACTOR OF HUMAN SELF-DETERMINATION

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## **Abstract**

The article presents the research on psychological factors of personal autonomy as a self-determination need and as a component of psychological well-being. The analysis was carried out in two directions: within in the theory of self-determination and within the theory of psychological well-being.

The greatest influence on autonomy development as a self-determination need have such predictors as goals in life, challenge, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, self-assurance, locus of control-life, locus of control-Self. Predictors that positively affect autonomy as a component of psychological well-being are: self-acceptance, acceptance of aggression, self-confidence, creativity, control, self-esteem.

The article determines that autonomy as a self-determination need is based not only on self-acceptance with all advantages and disadvantages, but also on existence of a goal in life and personal internal powers to achieve this goal. Autonomy, as it is understood in the theory of psychological well-being, is a necessary, but insufficient condition for self-determination. For formation and development of self-determination it is necessary to have a life purpose that gives meaningfulness to human life.

**Keywords:** *self-determination, personal autonomy, self-expression, psychological well-being.*

## **Introduction**

Growth of stresses in modern society forms a request for researching on conditions and processes contributing establishment of internal equilibrium and optimal human functioning. Human aspirations to a positive functioning are linked closely with such personal phenomena as autonomy, self-determination, psychological well-being and so on, which are important conditions for personal growth and high quality of life. Therefore, psychological and pedagogical researches aimed at identifying the factors of positive human functioning, disclosing internal powers that provide independence of choices or counteract negative environmental impacts are now very important.

Modern studies on autonomy are focused mainly on its practical aspects (Balkir, Arens, & Barnow, 2013; Osin, Ivanova, & Gordeeva, 2013; Boniwell, Osin, & Renton, 2015; Arvanitis, 2017; Jenő, Diseth, 2014 et al.). Thus, it has been shown that an autonomous person follows moral standards based on his/her intrinsic motivation. Numerous studies of personal autonomy have shown that an autonomous person is guided by his /her own law of development. Personal autonomy means a choice of behaviour based on a person's own internal criteria. However, the theoretical side of personal autonomy, especially factors influencing its emergence and development, internal resources, is still not fully understood.

The phenomenon of self-determination put forward the issues of personal self-activity, the human ability to choose independently directions of self-development. Therefore, the key concept of this theory is the notion of personal autonomy. A person can be autonomous if he/she acts as an actor, based on a deep sense of self. To be autonomous means to be self-initiated and self-regulated.

Manifestations of personal autonomy should be distinguished from blind following of personal internal impulses or desires, which does not always lead to a positive for personal development result. Most definitely, such delineation is defined by Frankl (Frankl, 1990), who distinguished “a freedom from” and “a freedom for” and emphasized inextricable links between freedom and responsibility. The scientists marked that freedom should be defined not as actions to implement the necessity, but as actions on the basis of awareness of alternatives and their consequences” (Frankl, 1990). Ultimately, a freedom depends on a person's courage to be him/herself and for him/herself.

Personal autonomy is studied most thoroughly in two directions – in the theory of self-determination, where personal autonomy is seen as a basic need, and in studies of psychological well-being. In the second case, personal autonomy is understood as a personal trait and a component of psychological well-being.

Consequently, *one* of the leading scientific *approaches*, the most appropriate for personal autonomy studies, is the theory of self-determination, which is a classical approach within positive psychology. It is based on the concept of three basic human needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Boniwell, Osin, & Renton 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the context of this approach, self-determination means a sense of freedom in relation to both the forces of external environment and personal internal forces; and self-determination is not only ability, but also a need (Ryan & Deci 2000). Personal autonomy is defined as a main innate inclination leading an actor to be engaged in an interested behaviour that have, usually, benefits for developing of flexible interactions with social environment.

*The second important approach* to personal autonomy studies is Ryff's concept of well-being (Ryff, 1995); here a multivariate model of psychological well-being is proposed based on 6 components manifesting positive psychological functioning: self-perception, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth. Like the theory of self-determination, the model of psychological well-being is based on the principle of balance between autonomy and permissiveness.

This problem is developed scientifically in many psychological approaches, such as: the existentially oriented theory of freedom (Frankl, 1990; May, 1980), the theory of personal being (Harre, 1983), the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the theory of self-actualization (Maslow, 2008), the time perspective (Nuttin, 1984), the theory of “flow” (Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and others.

Personal formation, implementation of personal capabilities and achievement of self (“to be oneself”) are the main subjects of the personal growth theories (Rogers, 2002; Maslow, 2008), which reveal personal autonomy from a special point of view: a personality is seen not only as somebody being in the process of development, but also as an actor striving for *self-development*, and a personal way of being means not only and not so much a level of personal autonomy, but also how much the person strives for autonomy and independence.

**The research aim** is to reveal the system determinants of personal autonomy based on theories of self-determination and psychological well-being.

**The object of research:** personal autonomy as a self-determination need and as a component of psychological well-being.

**The subject of research:** factors influencing personal autonomy.

### Methods of the research

Based on our goal, two methods were used to investigate personal autonomy in our empirical study: the self-determination test, where autonomy is understood as the basis for self-determination (Osin, Ivanova, & Gordeieva, 2013) and Ryff’s Scales of Psychological Well-being, here autonomy is considered as a component of psychological well-being (adaptation by Shevelenkova, & Fesenko) (Ryff, 1995). To disclose and expand the concept of personal autonomy and to define its personal determinants, we used: Purpose-in-Life Test, PIL J. Krambo, L. Maholika (Leontiev, 2006); the test-questionnaire of self-attitude (Stolin, & Pantileev, 1988); Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer, Jerusalem & Romek, 1996); Hardiness Test by S. Maddy (Leontiev, & Rasskazova, 2006); Shostrom’s Personal Orientation Inventory (Aleshina, Gozman, Dubovskaja, & Kroz, 1987).

For statistical analysis of the obtained data, the following methods of mathematical statistics were used: correlation, regression analysis. The processing of the obtained empirical data was carried out using the statistical software package SPSS 21.0 for Windows.

### Participants of the research

105 people participated in the survey: 50 students of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and 55 working specialists (Kyiv, Ukraine), 41 men and 64 women. The respondents’ age was from 18 to 32 years (average age is 24 years and std.dev is 6 years).

### Results

Pearson correlation between the personal autonomy indicators determined by Ryff’s Scales of Psychological Well-Being and by the Self-Determination Scale is 0.369 ( $\alpha$  (2-sides) = 0,008, so the calculated correlation is reliably significant).

First of all, it should be noted that the personal autonomy indicators, determined by different methods, do not have a high correlation. That is, they correlate, but they are not identical. It can be assumed that the examined methods determine somewhat different personal constructs.

In order to find independent variables that determine the common, nuclear part for both indicators of autonomy, measured by the two described above methods, as well as to find those independent variables that determine differences in the autonomy indicators determined by different methods, we have conducted a linear regression analysis. Here, the autonomy indicators act as dependent variables, while other personality characteristics are independent

ones. Such an approach has enabled us to find a more profound psychological significance of the studied indicators of personal autonomy.

*Results of the performed regression analysis*

1. Personal autonomy determined by the Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1995). Table 1 shows the main results of model constructing.

**Table 1.** The model of regression analysis for the autonomy indicator (determined by the Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being)

Model 1	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,748	,559	,538	6,968

Predictors: self-confidence, self-esteem, self-acceptance; control, support ratio, creativity, acceptance of aggression, affect balance, meaning of life.

A model is considered valid if R-square exceeds 0.5. The resulting value is greater than 0.5, so we can assert that the obtained model is statistically reliable. Table 2 shows the resulting coefficients of linear relations of the autonomy indicator with personal characteristics - predictors.

**Table 2.** Linear coefficients for the predictors

Model 1	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Tolerance
	Beta		
(Constant)		,000	
Self-confidence	,338	,000	,478
Control	,151	,019	,562
Support ration	-1,072	,000	,227
Self-esteem	,182	,018	,401
Self-acceptance	,715	,000	,225
Creativity	,271	,000	,649
Affects balance	-,043	,586	,378
Meaning of life	-,084	,209	,525
Acceptance of aggression	,602	,000	,404

The  $\alpha$  value for "affect balance" and "meaning of life" is too large, that is, these results are not statistically significant.

Therefore, predictors that have a positive influence on the autonomy indicator are: *self-acceptance* (a degree of acceptance by a person him/herself as he/she is, regardless of assessments of his/her positive traits and disadvantages), *acceptance of aggression* (ability to accept own natural aggressiveness as opposed to defensiveness, denial, and repression of aggression), *self-confidence* (attitude to oneself as a confident, independent, strong-willed and reliable person knowing for what he/she can be respected), *creativity* (creative orientations of a person), *control* (belief that struggle influences the outcomes of what is happening, even if that influence is not absolute and success is not guaranteed), *self-esteem* (capacity to appreciate advantages and positive properties of own nature).

The predictor having negative influence on the autonomy indicator is: *support ratio* (defines relative autonomy by assessing a balance between Other- and Inner-Directedness. Low scores on this indicator show a high degree of dependence, conformity).

So, on the one hand, we obtain such a set of personality traits of an autonomous person that indicate the persons' high satisfaction with his/her qualities, confidence in his/her own powers. Such a person feels: "I can", he/she is able to act based on own beliefs and goals. However, such a person does not see necessity to act at his/her discretion, having a position "I can, but I do not want, I do not aspire".

2. Personal autonomy determined by the Self-Determination Scale (Deci, & Ryan, 2000).

Table 3 shows the main results of model constructing.

**Table 3.** The model of regression analysis for the autonomy indicator (determined by the Self-Determination Scale)

Model 2	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
2	,844	,712	,693	3,666

Predictors: life purpose, locus of control-Self, locus of control-life, self-expression, self-efficacy, self-confidence, commitment, challenge, self-actualizing value, self-acceptance.

The R Square value is higher than 0.5, therefore the obtained model is statistically reliable.

Table 4 shows the resulting coefficients of linear relations of the autonomy indicator with personal characteristics - predictors.

**Table 4.** Linear coefficients for the predictors

Model 2	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	Tolerance
	Beta		
(Constant)		,009	
Life purpose	,510	,000	,193
Locus of control-Self	,160	,083	,182
Locus of control-life	,190	,011	,278
Self-expression	,090	,172	,354
Self-efficacy	,254	,000	,653
Self-confidence	,195	,001	,458
Commitment	-,428	,000	,303
Challenge	,395	,000	,404
Self-actualizing value	-,169	,009	,379
Self-acceptance	,221	,005	,255

The  $\alpha$  value for "self-expression" is too large, that is, this result is not statistically significant.

Thus, the predictors that have a positive influence on the autonomy indicator are: *life purpose* (existence or absence of life purposes for the future, giving meaning to life, orientation and time perspective), *challenge* (considering a life course as a way of experience gaining, readiness to act even without reliable guarantees for success, at own risk, belief that a desire for simple comfort and safety impoverishes life), *self-efficacy* (conviction of a person in his/her ability to manage events that affect his/her life), *self-confidence* (attitude to oneself as a confident, independent, strong-willed and reliable person knowing for what he/she can be

respected), *locus of control-life* (conviction in own ability to control own life freely, to make decisions and to put them into action), *locus of control-Self* (the idea of oneself as a strong person with sufficient freedom of choice to build own life in accordance with own goals, tasks and ideas).

The predictors influencing negatively the autonomy indicator are: *commitment* (the belief that engagement in what is happening gives the maximum chance to find something worthy and interesting), *self-actualizing value* (affirmation of primary values of self-actualizing people).

In this case, personal autonomy is based not only on accepting oneself with own advantages and disadvantages, but also on the existence of a life goal and internal powers to achieve this goal.

### Discussion of Results

Thus, personal autonomy can be achieved by a person with internal power actualization, changes in reality perception and ways of thinking that is based on positive self-acceptance, self-confidence, awareness of own life goals, harmonious relations with others, the ability to control oneself, own immediate impulses, the ability to build own live consciously and independently, finding joy in the surrounding everyday life. Personal autonomy is the basis and the main condition for achieving of psychological well-being and improving quality of life and self-determination.

As an interiorized form of self-identity, personal autonomy is manifested as a conscious choice of actions, taking into account both internal aspirations and external conditions of human life; personal autonomy is a manifestation of three personal traits: awareness, spontaneity, sincerity (Berne, 2002).

Factors that undermine autonomy, as a rule, divert attention from internal motivation, self-motivation, confidence, interest and personal hardiness. Lack of autonomy is associated with low self-esteem, motivation weakening or inconsistency, as well as other signs indicating psychological distress (Deci, & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, & Deci, 2000).

As it has already noted above, the theory of self-determination considers two needs, opposite by their nature. The need for autonomy is the need to be independent, to act at its own discretion, with own inner motivation. In contrast, the need for relatedness is a need to interact with other people, to establish close relations with them, and to act in the light of such relations, needs and aspirations of loved ones. Each person him/herself establishes a boundary between autonomy and relatedness, depending on personal inclinations, age, physical, intellectual development, as well as belonging to certain cultural groups. For instance, representatives of Asian countries (Philippines, Malaysia, China, and Japan) compared to residents of other regions experience less need in autonomy and higher need in relatedness (Church, Katigbak, Locke, et al, 2013). The work (Balkir, Arens, Barnow, 2013) shows that the feeling of relatedness predicts better psychological well-being of women from Turkey than that of women from Germany. Conversely, the greater satisfaction of the autonomy need greatly improves psychological well-being of German women.

### Conclusions

Thus, personal autonomy, examined from the standpoint of the psychological well-being theory, is based on such personal traits as self-acceptance with all advantages and disadvantages; respect to oneself, to own positive qualities; trying to live in accordance with own values, attitudes and principles, the belief that the struggle for them will lead to a positive

result; resistance to external influences. People with such personality traits can act on their own grounds, they feel the power and ability for internally motivated actions, and this gives them a sense of psychological well-being. However, will such a person act? Here, we have a definite static picture, without development.

In the self-determination theory, personal autonomy is also based on such personality traits as self-acceptance with all advantages and disadvantages and self-esteem. However, the key to autonomy achievement is awareness of a life goal, which gives meaningfulness to own life, orientation and a sense of perspective. In this case, a person is not afraid to take a risk and make a responsible decision because he/she believes that experience can be obtained only in actions, through which the person can control his/her own life and that is why he/she has the freedom of choice. Such an interpretation of autonomy is much wider as it introduces a dynamic aspect. A person begins to act, and is acting on the basis of his/her own choice. And the ability to choose and have a choice is the essence of self-determination. Being self-determined, a person acts on the basis of his/her own choice, and not on the basis of obligations or coercion. This, in turn, raises the level of internal, in other words, autonomous motivation of own actions. It is here the notion of “a freedom for ...”, a freedom as an action on the basis of awareness of alternatives and their consequences arises.

Thus, autonomy, as it is understood in the theory of psychological well-being, is a necessary, but insufficient condition for self-determination. An additional condition is necessary for formation and development of a self-determined person: existence of a life purpose, which gives meaning to all human activities. Real autonomy of a self-determined person is based not only on such lower-level factors as needs or motives, but also on the higher-level factors supporting creation of meanings for a human life.

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### *Summary*

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The key point to achieve autonomy is existence of a life goal, which gives meaningfulness to life, orientation and a sense of perspective. In this case, a person is not afraid to take a risk and make a responsible decision because he/she believes that experience can be obtained only in actions, through which the person can control his/her own life and that is why he/she has the freedom of choice. Such an interpretation of autonomy is much wider as it introduces a dynamic aspect. A person begins to act, and is acting on the basis of his/her own choice. And the ability to choose and have a choice is the essence of self-determination. Being self-determined, a person acts on the basis of his/her own choice, and not on the basis of obligations or coercion. This, in turn, raises the level of internal, in other words, autonomous motivation of own actions. It is here the notion of “a freedom for ...”, a freedom as an action on the basis of awareness of alternatives and their consequences arises.

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