



### **////Title: The Effects of Autonomy on Motivation in Different Cultures**

#### **////Stand-first:**

Social psychology is the scientific study of individuals in society. An immense body of work has demonstrated that social cues, such as the facial expressions and body language of others, affect our motivation. One line of research suggests that autonomy-supportive instructions enhance motivation. However, this work has primarily been conducted in Western contexts and relatively little has been established about the universality of such effects across different cultures. Dr Ritu (ri-too) Tripathi (tri-pah-thee) at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore and her colleagues are working to overcome this knowledge gap, with important theoretical and methodological implications for the business world and beyond.

#### **////Body text:**

Motivation is the drive and desire to act in a way that will achieve our goals and targets. From training for a 5k run to simply drinking a glass of water to reduce thirst, motivation underpins the actions that get things done.

From a business management perspective, understanding the motivation of employees is critical to maximising performance and profit. Autonomy – the extent to which a job allows an employee to function independently of orders or instructions from others – is thought to be vital to productivity. For example, Job Design Theory suggests that providing greater autonomy for employees increases their levels of motivation. Self Determination theory proposes that autonomy is a universal and essential need. Even an intervention as simple as the language used when asking individuals to complete a task has been shown to be beneficial. For example, using phrases such as ‘could you...?’ rather than ‘you must...’ increases the autonomous motivation of individuals to complete work-related tasks.

However, these findings are based almost entirely on research conducted in Western contexts. Autonomy has been proposed to be a universal human need, but there are a number of reasons why this assumption may not be correct.

For example, our self-concept, that is, our awareness of ourselves and how we feel about ourselves, differs considerably in different cultural contexts. Research suggests that individuals in Asian cultures often develop a more interdependent self-concept in which they are driven to meet the needs and expectations of others, whereas individuals in European and American cultures are often more highly driven by their own needs and expectations. This means that individuals in different cultures may respond differently to the provision of autonomy in the workplace.

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Dr Ritu Tripathi at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore and her colleagues are the first researchers to directly examine how the impact of the provision of autonomy may differ according to culture using an experimental approach.

Using a novel behavioural task of poster judging, the researchers were able to overcome the limitations associated with self-report measures of motivation that are the mainstay of much cross-cultural research in this area. The researchers manipulated the motivational cues provided during the poster judging task so that they were either autonomy-supportive or obligation-supportive.



Autonomy-supportive motivation cues emphasised the element of choice in how the participant should approach the task, using phrases such as ‘if you want’ and ‘you might’. Obligation-supportive cues used much more directive phrases, such as ‘tell us which poster is better’. The substantive information to the participants in both conditions was the same.

Participants were recruited from multinational companies based in India and the United States. Dr Tripathi and her colleagues found that autonomy-supportive motivational cues resulted in the American participants spending more time on the poster judgment task than the Indian participants. In contrast, obligation-supportive motivational cues had the opposite effect, with Indian participants tending to dramatically outperform their American peers in this experimental condition.

These powerful results refute the assumption that autonomy boosts motivation in a universal way. Although the effect was robust in the American participants, autonomy-supportive instructions reduced the motivation of Indian participants compared with obligation-supportive instructions. The researchers also confirmed that these effects were independent of any effects of the different types of instructions on mood. Dr Tripathi and her colleagues drew the conclusion that individuals respond to social situations in culturally specific and adaptive ways.

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Dr Tripathi and her colleagues undertook a second study to try to understand precisely why the Indian and American participants differed so dramatically in their responses to the different types of motivational cue. In this study, the researchers directly asked Indian and American participants whether they preferred instructions that emphasised autonomy or those that emphasised obligations. Based on the findings from their first study, they predicted that Indian participants would prefer instructions focusing on obligations and that American participants would prefer instructions centred around autonomy.

Dr Tripathi and her colleagues were correct. They also probed as to why participants preferred specific types of instructions. American participants found the instructions emphasising obligation to be overly bossy and directive. In contrast, Indian participants rated these instructions positively, endorsing the belief that following direction is important. The opposite was found for instructions emphasising autonomy. While the American participants rated these as positive, placing value on the promotion of freedom, Indian participants were much less in favour of this approach.

These striking findings confirm that we cannot simply assume that, at least in the context of understanding motivation, that effects presumed universal in Western cultures will necessarily hold up when tested in different cultural contexts.

Dr Tripathi and her colleagues note that a universalistic Western motivational theory may not be able to account for their findings. They argue, instead, that a cultural psychology perspective in which different cultural contexts are likely to foster quite different capabilities and tendencies in individuals is more amenable to their findings. They also point to the need to be aware of how, in any culture, a work environment that contravenes the cultural expectations of employees is likely to have a demotivating effect.

An important, practical implication of the work by Dr Tripathi and her colleagues relates to the management approaches adopted in multinational organisations. For managers, an appreciation of, and sensitivity to different cultural expectations and norms becomes necessary when considering the



motivation of employees. In other words, a 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to maximise the productivity of a culturally diverse group of employees.

Dr Tripathi and colleagues conclude their work with a warning against relying upon the simplistic stereotyping of different groups of employees based on a single characteristic. From both the applied and theoretical perspectives, they argue for the need to bear in mind the individual and personal factors that influence motivation and behaviour in the workplace.

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