**School-To-Work:**

**The Interplay of Career Guidance, Conscientiousness,**

**and Autonomous Motivation**

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ABSTRACT

The motivation literature has typically focused on motivation at the workplace.

This conceptual paper attempts to to extend the broad discussion of motivation to include the under-examined aspect of motivation to work, and to extend the self-determiantion theory model by using it as the basis of conceptualizing career guidance. Given this, I propose a framework to examine how career guidance services, offered to graduating seniors, predict their motivation to work after graduating, and subsequently generates their psychological wellbeing. This proposed framework extends the self-determination theory model and invites questions about the adequacy of an existing motivational theory to address motivation at the school-to-work transition stage.

**Keywords:**career guidance services, motivation, motivation-to-work, self-determination theory, psychological wellbeing

**School to Work: The Interplay of Career Guidance, Conscientiousness, and Autonomous Motivation**

Over the past century, motivation theory has typically focused on motivation

during work (Kanfer, Beier, & Ackerman, 2013). Considerable attention has been paid to how motivation at the workplace could lead to performance, job satisfaction, and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Yet, there are points in individuals’ lives when they may not be working for one reason or another: school, unemployment, illness, or injury, and thereby have to make the transition to work once they become employed (Kanfer, Frese, & Johnson, 2017).

Research over the years has highlighted the relevance of motivation during this

transition to work period as it holds serious implications for public policy and organizations (Kanfer et al., 2017). One such transition is school-to-work, from college to joining the workforce, which has had several criticisms, such as its weak linkages between schooling and employment, levelled against it (Ryan, 2001). According to Bridgstock (2009), although universities are under pressure to produce employable graduates, the development of the career management skills necessary for employability among students is still low. Thus, recent graduates are not well prepared for the world of work.

Over the years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of

career guidance in schools (Watts & Sultana, 2004). Although there exists a plethora of research on career guidance, few scholars have conceptualized the construct in the context of motivation theory. One such motivation theory that has proved invaluable for explaining career-related constructs is the self-determination theory (Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschnes, 2006).

SDT is explanatory, as such it clearly demonstrates environmental and social supports, as well as the obstacles that influence an individual’s motivation and self-regulation capacity (Ryan, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, 2019). Moreover, self-determination theory (SDT) is relevant to the Five Factor Model (FFM) and models in the career literature have emphasized the significance of personality traits (Lent, Morris, Penn & Ireland, 2018; Ryan et al., 2019). One such personality trait that has a well-documented relationship with career-related variables is conscientiousness (Lent et al., 2018).

The limited conceptualization of motivation to work and career guidance in the

motivation context necessitates this present theorizing about career guidance in the SDT context, resultant outcomes, and the role of personality. To this end, this paper focuses on motivation to work, specifically during the school-to-work transition phase of college seniors. Thus, the paper will use this conceptual gap as the springboard upon which to develop a motivation-to-work theory. I apply SDT as the underlying motivation theory. First, I employ the fundamental tenets of self-determination theory to explain how career guidance services, offered to graduating seniors during their college careers, predict their autonomous motivation-to-work after graduating, and subsequently generate psychological wellbeing, a well-documented outcome of SDT (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). Finally, the paper culminates with a discussion of the theoretical implications and future research opportunities.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

Self-determination theory postulates a multidimensional theory of motivation,

which is based on the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for behaving, leading to differential performance and wellbeing outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to self-determination theory, both performance and wellbeing of employees are influenced by the kind of motivation they possess for their job activities (Deci, et al., 2017). While autonomous motivation involves acting out of one’s own volition and having the freedom to make a choice, controlled motivation involves acting with a sense of having to participate in the activity (Gagné & Deci 2005).

In theories developed by Gagné and Deci (2005) and Ryan (2012), self-determination theory’s controlled-to-autonomous motivation continuum

describes the extent to which an individual has internalized an external regulation, such that the more fully it has been internalized, the more autonomous the ensuing, extrinsically motivated behavior will be. Thus, internalization comprises three different dimensions: introjection, identification, and integration. A regulation is described as introjected when the individual has taken it in but has not yet accepted it as his or her own. Identified regulation involves an individual understanding and accepting the true importance of the activity that is identifying with the value of the behavior for themselves. Finally, integrated regulation involves the individual having a complete sense of the behavior being an integral part of who he or she is, emanating from his or her sense of self, and therefore being self-determined.

Developmentally, integrated regulation is viewed as the most advanced form of

extrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci 2005). Although it shares similarities with intrinsic motivation, it is regarded as extrinsic motivation because it is typified by the activity being instrumentally essential for personal goals, instead of the individual merely being interested in the activity (Gagné & Deci, 2005)**.** It is important to note that these motivations lie along the continuum, in ascending order of autonomy, from external, introjected, identified, and integrated to intrinsic motivation.

When the aforementioned motivations are measured empirically, their inter-

correlations form an almost simplex pattern wherein the closest motivation types along the continuum are the most highly related (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Overall, self-determination theory proposes a continuum of self-determination wherein the more autonomous forms of motivation predict outcomes such as greater persistence, performance quality, well-being and other organizational variables over time, better than the more controlled forms of motivation can (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005)**.** It is for this reason that an understanding of autonomous motivation, as well as its antecedents and outcomes, becomes crucial.

**Career Guidance Services, Autonomous Motivation, Psychological Wellbeing, and Conscientiousness**

According Gagné and Deci (2005), self-determination theory posits that the

processes of intrinsic motivation and internalization require certain nutriments for their peak performance. These nutriments are supplied by the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Drawing from the concept of locus of causality, the need for autonomy refers to people’s need to act with a sense of owning their behavior. While the need for autonomy is sometimes misinterpreted as the need to act independently of the wishes of others, it implies, instead, the need to act with a sense of volition and choice even if doing so means obeying the requests of others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, and Rosen, (2016) describe the need for

competence as individuals needing to feel a sense of control over their environment, as well as to acquire new skills. This need is integral to individuals’ proclivity to discover and control the environment, and in their quest to be challenged. Finally, the relatedness need is defined as the need to feel connected to other people: a need that is fulfilled when individuals view themselves as part of a group, feel a sense of unity, and cultivate meaningful relationships with others (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Overall, the notion of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness stipulates the nutriments needed within a social context for it to be categorized as autonomy supportive, controlling, or amotivating (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

To this end, research has shown that social and environmental factors, such as the

socializing agent in the immediate social environment context, can either foster or impede the satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A career guidance counselor at a university is a prime example of an agent of socialization in the immediate social context (Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990).

Watts and Sultana (2004) describe career guidance as services meant to aid

individuals, of all ages and at any stage in life, to make education, training, or occupation decisions as well as to manage their careers. These include but are not limited to services provided in schools, colleges, universities, training institutions, organizations, public employment agencies, community/voluntary agencies, and private agencies. These services may be on either an individual or group basis and may be offered in-person or at a distance (e.g., helplines and online services). These services comprise career information (print, digital, etc.), assessment and self-assessment tools, counseling sessions, career education as well as career management programs, taster programs, work search programs, and transition services.

Research has shown that the effects of autonomy-supportive environments on

wellbeing outcomes are mediated by autonomous motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Generally, empirical studies have shown that autonomy-supportive environments and methods foster the satisfaction of basic needs, intrinsic motivation, and total internalization of extrinsic motivation, subsequently leading to psychological wellbeing (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For instance, Blais and Brière (1993) found that the autonomy support provided by managers was positively related to the autonomous motivation of subordinates.

Thus, career guidance creates an autonomy-supportive environment, wherein the three

basic psychological needs of the students are met, and this results in their autonomous motivation to work (Guay et al., 2006; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). The proposed relationship is formally stated as:

*Proposition 1: Providing career guidance to graduating seniors creates an autonomy-supportive environment that will result in their autonomous motivation-to-work after graduating.*

Autonomous motivation involves acting out of one’s own volition and having the

freedom to make a choice (Gagné & Deci, 2005). It encompasses two broad forms of motivation: intrinsic motivation as well as well-internalized extrinsic motivation. While intrinsic motivation is prototypically autonomous and is a demonstration of the individual’s active nature, the well-internalized extrinsic motivation forms as a result of the natural integrative predisposition, which is fundamental to the healthy development of the individual (Ryan, 2012). Research has established that autonomous motivation maximizes several positive outcomes, key among which is wellbeing (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

The concept of wellbeing is complex, controversial, and centers on optimal experience

and functioning. Waterman (1993) theorizes that it comprises two general perspectives: hedonism and eudaimonism. Hedonism emphasizes happiness and describes wellbeing as pleasure attainment and pain avoidance. Subjective wellbeing is the dominant construct and comprises three dimensions, namely life satisfaction, presence of positive mood, and absence of negative mood; altogether summed up as happiness. Eudaimonism underscores meaning and self-realization, describing wellbeing as the extent to which an individual is fully functioning. Its dominant construct is psychological wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993).

There have been debates about associating hedonism with wellbeing, and also

regarding the extent to which subjective wellbeing represents an adequate measure of psychological wellness (Ryff & Singer, 1998). In spite of this, subjective wellbeing has dominated as the main measure of wellbeing for several years. Researchers, however, distinguished psychological wellbeing from subjective wellbeing and developed a multidimensional measure (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Self-determination theory is aligned with the eudaimonic perspective (Ryan &

Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). As already stated, self-determination theory proposes that the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—provides the requisite nutriments for intrinsic motivation and internalization and generates psychological wellbeing (Chen et al., 2015; Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Moreover, self-determination theory proposes that the satisfaction of the basic

psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in autonomy-supportive environments enhances individuals’ intrinsic motivation and promotes the full internalization of extrinsic motivation (Chen et al., 2015; Guay et al., 2006; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). This, in turn, generates positive work outcomes, such as psychological wellbeing (Chen et al., 2015; Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). I therefore predict that:

*Proposition 2: Career guidance, an autonomy support, provided to graduating seniors will enhance their psychological wellbeing at their workplaces, through autonomous motivation-to-work.*

The Five Factor Model of personality—comprising Extraversion, Agreeableness,

Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Openness—is arguably the most widely used typology of personality traits (Major, Turner & Fletcher, 2006). Studies have shown that personality influences motivation, and, therefore, individual differences exist in motivation (Judge & Ilies, 2002). In fact, motivation is thought to be the primary means through which personality influences work behavior. In view of this, researchers (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 2005) have called for more research into the motivational processes through which personality affects performance.

Of the Five Factor Model dimensions, Conscientiousness has demonstrated the

most robust and consistent correlations with work outcomes, across jobs and settings (Barrick et al., 2005). Conscientiousness measures the degree to which an individual is “planful, organized, hardworking, persistent, and achievement-oriented” (Barrick & Mount, 1991, p. 22). Therefore, highly conscientious individuals are typically achievement-oriented, dependable, responsible, and goal-oriented (Barrick et al., 2005; Major et al., 2006).

In fact, Conscientiousness is regarded as a measure of trait-oriented work

motivation, as it seems to influence all forms of job performance through its “will do” motivation component (Barrick & Mount, 2005). It therefore comes as no surprise that Conscientiousness has been found to be associated with volitional behavior (Barrick & Mount, 1991), performance motivation (Judge & Illies, 2002), and career-related variables (Lent et al.,2018). Based on the above review, the following is proposed:

*Proposition 3: The level of conscientiousness of the graduating seniors will moderate the relationship between the career guidance they received and their autonomous motivation-to-work.*

Based on the above, the proposed conceptual model is represented in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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**THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this conceptual paper, I conceptualize career guidance in an SDT context with

emphasis on the motivation to work. To this end, I propose a framework to examine how career guidance services, offered to graduating seniors, predict their autonomous motivation to work after graduating, and result in psychological wellbeing of the employed graduates. This proposed framework invites questions about the adequacy of the existing motivational theory to address motivation at the various life stages of individuals, such as the school-to-work transition phase. In so doing, it provides opportunities for extending the current motivational theory to include both career guidance and motivation to work. Overall, it is hoped that this will stimulate new ways of thinking about the study and modeling of both career guidance and motivation.

**Implications for Self-Determination Theory**

Typically, the basic model of self-determination starts with two independent

variables: social context variables and individual differences variables. Their effects on dependent variables are usually mediated by either the basic psychological need variables or motivation variables (Deci et al., 2017).

Finally, the dependent variables are usually either performance variables or

wellbeing/ill-being variables (Deci et al., 2017). This paper extends this basic SDT model by using it as the basis of its conceptualization of career guidance and by theorizing about motivation to work instead of the usual motivation during work. In so doing, this paper contributes to the study of SDT as an evolving theoretical framework.

**Future Research Opportunities**

This paper has implications for future research. First, the present theory highlights

the lack of a motivation to work model. Existing models in the motivation literature largely address motivation during work. However, these models may not conceptually address motivation to work. The development of a model for motivation to work therefore presents an interesting research opportunity. Second, the present theory conceptualizes career guidance in the SDT context. Future research could study the relationships between career guidance and well-documented SDT variables such as individual causality orientations and negative outcomes.

With regards to methodology, scholars looking to empirically examine these propositions will need to employ longitudinal research designs so as to establish change from one point in time (pre-graduation) to another (post-graduation employment).

**CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, this conceptual paper attempts to extend the broad discussion of

motivation to include the under-examined aspect of motivation to work, and to extend the self-determiantion theory model by using it as the basis of conceptualizing career guidance. Career guidance services offered to graduating seniors during their college careers can enhance their autonomous motivation to work after graduating and result in psychological wellbeing. Based on this, I propose a framework that extends the self-determination theory model, invites questions about the adequacy of the existing motivational theory to address motivation at the school-to-work transition phase, and provides opportunities for extending the current motivational theory to include motivation to work. It is hoped that this will fuel novel ways of conceptualizing motivation.

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**FIGURE 1**

 **Conceptual Model**

