

SELF-COMPLETION THEORY

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Self-Completion Theory: The Drive for Personal Wholeness

1. The Core Definition and Mechanism

Self-Completion Theory, as interpreted within the context of humanistic motivation and development, posits that human behavior is fundamentally driven by an innate, persistent striving toward achieving a sense of personal wholeness and realizing one's full potential. This theoretical framework moves beyond simple deficiency motivation--the idea that behavior is only aimed at resolving deficits--and instead focuses on growth motivation. The core mechanism involves the individual continuously seeking congruence between their perceived self and their ideal self, a process demanding persistent effort and engagement with the environment. This drive is not merely about accumulating skills but integrating those skills into a cohesive, competent identity that feels complete and self-sufficient.

The pursuit of wholeness is structured hierarchically, echoing similar concepts in motivation theory. Individuals must first address and satisfy basic, foundational needs before they can genuinely dedicate psychological energy toward achieving higher, more abstract goals related to self-definition. Satisfying these lower-level needs provides the essential stability and psychological security necessary for the arduous and complex journey of self-actualization. The theory suggests that the state of "completion" is less a final destination and more a continuous, dynamic process of mastering challenges and internalizing competencies that reinforce the individual's sense of efficacy and identity integrity.

A key idea embedded within this framework is that this striving for completion is an active, agentic process. It requires the individual to engage proactively with their environment, seeking out opportunities for mastery and competence. When individuals successfully overcome obstacles and achieve mastery in domains they deem important to their self-definition, they experience a profound sense of self-fulfillment, which acts as the intrinsic reinforcement loop driving further efforts toward achieving that ultimate sense of personal wholeness. This internal motivation is critical, suggesting that externally imposed goals are insufficient to sustain the long-term pursuit of self-completion.

2. Historical Roots and Conceptual Development

The conceptual origins of this interpretation of Self-Completion Theory can be traced back to the early 20th-century work of Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler. Adler introduced the concepts of the feeling of inferiority and the subsequent striving for superiority. Adler proposed that humans are motivated by a need to overcome perceived deficits or weaknesses, transforming a sense of incompleteness into a striving toward perfection or wholeness. This striving--often framed as moving from a "minus" position to a "plus" position--laid the philosophical foundation for viewing

psychological motivation as a future-oriented, compensatory drive toward competence.

However, the specific application of this drive to the broader humanistic concept of reaching one's full potential was formally expanded upon in the 1960s by psychologist Robert White. While White is most famously associated with his work on Competence Motivation, his ideas directly informed this theory's focus on innate drives. White argued against purely drive-reduction models, proposing instead that humans possess an inherent, autonomous drive for competence or effectance--the ability to interact effectively with the environment. This concept redefined motivation, suggesting that the pleasure derived from mastery itself is the primary motivator, aligning perfectly with the idea that individuals seek completeness through demonstrating capability.

The synthesis of Adler's compensatory striving and White's competence drive forms the historical basis of this theoretical approach to self-completion. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers began integrating these ideas with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, asserting that the drive to achieve personal wholeness (or self-actualization) represents the apex of human motivation. This integration provided a dynamic model where the psychological systems seek equilibrium and closure by continuously bridging the gap between who the person currently is and who they have the innate potential to become, solidifying its place within the emerging field of humanistic psychology.

3. Core Assumptions and Motivational Dynamics

Self-Completion Theory rests on several fundamental assumptions regarding human nature and motivation, which dictate the dynamics of the pursuit of wholeness. These assumptions distinguish it from purely behavioral or psychoanalytic models, emphasizing free will, inherent potential, and purpose-driven action. The motivation underpinning this theory is intensely internal, meaning the individual is the primary engine of their own development and completion.

The motivational dynamics are often described through a clear progression of needs satisfaction. Individuals are not able to focus their energy on abstract psychological fulfillment if their physiological or safety needs are unmet. Therefore, the trajectory of self-completion necessitates a sequential movement, where stability forms the bedrock for growth. This sequential process ensures that psychological resources are efficiently directed, first toward survival and security, and then progressively toward identity formation and personal mastery.

The core assumptions defining this trajectory can be summarized as follows:

Innate Potential and Drive: People possess an inherent, biological imperative to reach their maximum potential. This drive is not learned but is fundamental to the human condition, compelling individuals toward mastery and growth throughout the lifespan, regardless of environmental pressures.

Hierarchical Need Satisfaction: The striving for self-completion proceeds by satisfying fundamental, basic needs (such as physiological and safety requirements) before psychological energy can be fully invested in higher-order needs, such as cognitive fulfillment, aesthetic appreciation, and finally, the pursuit of personal wholeness.

Motivation by Wholeness: The primary force motivating self-actualization is an internal sense of deficiency or incompleteness that seeks resolution through competence. Achieving success in valued life domains provides the subjective feeling of personal wholeness, which acts as the ultimate reward and reinforces the pursuit of further developmental goals.

Holistic Change: The process of self-actualization involves concurrent psychological and physiological transformation. True completion requires changes not only in cognitive understanding and emotional regulation but also potentially in physical behaviors, habits, and engagement with the external world.

4. Practical Illustration: Achieving Professional Wholeness

To illustrate the application of Self-Completion Theory, consider the real-world scenario of an individual pursuing a new career as a writer. Initially, the individual may define themselves as a writer but feel a profound sense of inadequacy or incompleteness due to a lack of published work, formal training, or critical recognition. This perceived gap between their self-definition (I am a writer) and their actual competence level (I have no external proof) creates the necessary tension that fuels the self-completion drive.

The individual applies the psychological principle in a step-by-step manner. First, they must satisfy basic needs related to their new identity--this might involve securing stable time and space for writing (basic needs met) and investing in necessary tools (security and preparation). The application of the theory then shifts to the drive for competence and wholeness:

Defining the Deficit: The individual identifies specific areas of incompleteness, such as a lack of mastery in narrative structure or editing skills. This perceived deficit provides the motivational impetus.

Symbolic and Behavioral Investment: They engage in goal-directed behaviors, such as enrolling in rigorous writing courses, committing to daily word counts, and seeking out tough editorial feedback. These actions are deliberate investments aimed at bridging the competence gap.

Achieving Mastery (Internalization): Through consistent effort, the individual achieves small victories--mastering a difficult chapter, receiving positive feedback, or completing a manuscript. This mastery leads to internalizing the skill, transforming it from a desired state into an integrated part of the self-concept.

Attaining Wholeness: Upon achieving a significant milestone, such as the publication of their first novel, the individual experiences a sense of competence and completeness. The internal identity ("I am a writer") now aligns with external evidence and internalized skill, satisfying the innate drive for personal wholeness in that specific domain. This satisfaction then paves the way for the pursuit of new, higher-level challenges, such as mastery in a new genre or achieving literary recognition.

5. Significance in Humanistic Psychology

Self-Completion Theory holds significant importance, particularly within the domain of Humanistic Psychology, because it offers a positive, growth-oriented view of human motivation. Unlike earlier models that focused heavily on pathology or biological drives, this theory centers the human experience on aspiration, inherent goodness, and the potential for transcendence. By emphasizing the intrinsic need for competence and mastery, it provides a powerful counter-narrative to deterministic views of behavior, promoting the idea that individuals are motivated by internal factors such as personal growth and self-fulfillment rather than solely by external rewards or punishments.

The impact of this theory is evident in its ability to explain why individuals continue to strive even when basic survival needs are met. Studies, such as those conducted by Carver and Scheier (1981), have supported the notion that individuals with higher levels of self-actualization are predominantly motivated by intrinsic factors. This focus on internal drive validates the pursuit of activities that may not yield immediate material benefit but contribute deeply to the individual's sense of identity and purpose. The theory therefore provides a vital framework for understanding purposeful living and the psychological rewards of vocational commitment and personal development.

Furthermore, the concept of self-completion has shifted psychological research toward examining positive psychological states. Instead of focusing exclusively on what goes wrong in human development, this framework encourages the study of optimal functioning, resilience, and the factors that facilitate peak experiences. Its significance lies in validating the search for meaning and the developmental process as central, rather than peripheral, to psychological health, influencing subsequent theories in positive psychology and existential therapy.

6. Applications in Therapy and Personal Growth

The practical applications of Self-Completion Theory are broad, extending from clinical therapy to educational pedagogy and organizational management. In therapeutic settings, understanding the client's striving for wholeness allows therapists to frame psychological distress not merely as illness, but as a failure or obstruction in the client's innate drive toward completion. Therapy, in this context, becomes a process of identifying where the client's self-definition is incomplete or

threatened and helping them develop the competence and agency required to close that gap.

In the realm of personal growth and education, the theory is used to structure learning environments that maximize intrinsic motivation. Educational models influenced by this theory prioritize self-directed learning, allowing students choice in tasks and encouraging deep engagement rather than rote memorization. This approach recognizes that when tasks are perceived as contributing meaningfully to a student's self-definition (e.g., "I am a successful scientist" instead of "I passed a test"), the motivation is more robust and sustainable. The work of Dember and Tharp (1978), which found a correlation between higher levels of self-actualization and participation in activities aimed at personal wholeness, supports the efficacy of structuring environments to facilitate this internal drive.

Moreover, in organizational behavior, this framework helps managers understand that employees are often seeking more than just extrinsic rewards like salary or fame; they are seeking competence, recognition, and the feeling that their work contributes to their identity as capable professionals. Consequently, effective management often involves providing opportunities for skill mastery and autonomy, thereby tapping into the powerful resource of intrinsic motivation to drive performance and job satisfaction. The theory suggests that workplaces fostering an environment where individuals can feel truly competent and complete in their professional roles will experience greater employee loyalty and productivity.

7. Connections to Related Psychological Frameworks

Self-Completion Theory is intimately connected to several other major psychological concepts, primarily operating within the broader category of personality and motivational psychology. Its reliance on a structured progression of needs links it inextricably to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While Maslow's work clearly delineates the path from basic survival needs to self-actualization, Self-Completion Theory provides a deeper mechanism for the motivation at the top tier, explaining the underlying psychological tension (incompleteness) that propels the individual toward that final state of fulfillment.

The concept is also closely related to Robert White's work on **Competence Motivation**, sometimes referred to as effectance motivation. White's model provides the fundamental language for understanding the active, non-drive-reducing behavior involved in self-completion. Competence motivation asserts that the organism derives satisfaction simply from being effective and mastering its environment, which is the behavioral manifestation of the deeper psychological drive toward personal wholeness described by Self-Completion Theory.

Finally, this framework shares common ground with Control Theory models, such as those proposed by Carver and Scheier (1981). Control theories analyze self-regulation as a feedback loop where individuals constantly monitor their current state against a reference value (their ideal

or complete self). When a discrepancy is detected, the individual acts to reduce that error. Self-Completion Theory provides the high-level reference goal--personal wholeness--which the control mechanisms strive to maintain, thereby bridging motivational psychology with cognitive models of self-regulation and goal pursuit.

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