



## The roles of autonomy support and harmonious and obsessive passions in educational persistence

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims at examining the role of autonomy support and passion in the persistence of students involved in higher education. In academic settings, autonomy-supportive environments consider students as self-determined individuals who are capable of making choices. In contrast, controlling academic environments impose pressure on students without giving them a clear rationale for doing so. Because autonomy support facilitates the self-determined internalization of behavior, it is expected to be associated with a harmonious passion and with high persistence into the chosen field of study, whereas less autonomy-supportive environments are expected to relate to obsessive passion and to hinder persistence. The results of two studies involving music students, using correlational and short longitudinal designs, mainly supported these hypotheses. The divergent impact of autonomy support and passion in persistence is discussed.

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*Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal: my strength lies solely in my tenacity.* Louis Pasteur

### 1. Introduction

As with many other achievers, the famous biologist Louis Pasteur was seen by his professors as an average student. Yet, as this quote demonstrates, his persistence throughout the years has led him to obtain the highest academic degree and to discover some of the most influential medical innovations of all times. According to one of his biographers, Pasteur would never have persisted in higher education without the encouragement and support from one of his high school professors (Vallery-Radot, 1994).

This anecdote is only one of the many examples of the roles of determination and social support in retention and persistence in education. In fact, researchers in education and in psychology have long held an interest in the subjective (intentions) and objective (dropout rates) components of students' persistence (e.g. Tinto, 2006). In line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the persistence that students display towards their own schooling could be partly explained by the autonomy-supportive interpersonal style adopted by their teachers. In addition, The Dualistic Model of Passion proposes that obsessive and harmonious passions towards education can provide some insights regarding the individual processes related to persistence in educational

settings. In two studies involving music students, this article addresses the question of how autonomy support and passion facilitate persistence in higher education.

#### 1.1. Autonomy support from teachers

As suggested by SDT, the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness should be satisfied in order for people to achieve optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1987, 2000). In addition, this theory posits that the satisfaction of these needs are fostered in an autonomy-supportive environment and hindered in a controlling environment. In academic settings, the concept of autonomy support refers to environments that consider students as self-determined individuals who are capable of making choices (Black & Deci, 2000). On the contrary, psychologically controlling environments place value on authority, where pressure and control are used to make students behave in a specific way (Soenens, Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Dohy, & Goossens, 2012). Autonomy support and psychological control in the educational context have mostly been assessed as two opposite poles of a continuum: from very controlling to very autonomy-supportive (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). However, some authors have suggested that psychological control might not be the exact opposite of autonomy-support (Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003). In fact, educators and teachers often display both autonomy supportive, such as providing choice and being empathetic, and controlling behavior, such as pressuring students and being negative (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2008).

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Autonomy-supportive teachers acknowledge their students' emotions and thoughts, give adequate structure and feedback, give a meaningful rationale for tasks and provide opportunities for decision-making. Students who perceive their teachers as autonomy-supportive display a higher self esteem and are more satisfied with their life (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Sheldon, Abad, & Omoile, 2009). At the post-secondary level, autonomy support from teachers is associated with self-determined forms of motivation and with higher perceptions of competence (e.g. Williams & Deci, 1998). In terms of school environment, students have more positive feelings towards the academic institution in general and fewer negative feelings towards school-related work if they believe their autonomy is acknowledged (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Williams et al., 2006). Students who feel that they are supported also show enhanced academic self-regulation, psychological adjustment, learning, performance, and persistence (Black & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004).

In contrast, teachers who exert psychological control are centered on their own agenda rather than being focused on their students' needs. Those teachers tend to give answers to students instead of giving hints, to use 'should' or other directive statements, to interrupt their students and to criticize them (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Under psychological control, students experience higher levels of anxiety and lower well being, as well as diminished task enjoyment and engagement (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2009). Perceived psychological control also has been linked with decreased autonomous motivation and lesser use of adaptive meta-cognitive strategies (Soenens et al., 2012).

In summary, students who feel that their autonomy is supported by their educators are more likely to engage in learning tasks for autonomous reasons. As a result, they report having a more positive experience at school, using more efficient learning strategies and they display higher levels of performance and persistence. The opposite is found when students perceive that their teacher is psychologically controlling.

### 1.2. *Harmonious and obsessive passion*

In line with the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand, 2010; Vallerand et al., 2003), a few important activities that people love, that they value, and into which they devote their time and energy, come to be self-defining and are considered a passion. Integrated in the above-mentioned definition is the core concept of inclusion of the activity into the self. Indeed, people who are passionate should feel that their activity is a central part of their identity. For example, music students who are passionate about music see themselves as musicians. Numerous studies have related passion with activity identification: individuals who are passionate towards their studies, dance, sports, and even politics do perceive their passionate activity as self-defining.

In order to be considered as passionate, individuals should at least moderately agree that: they are passionate for their activity, the activity is important to them, they regularly spend time and energy on it, and they love it. The midpoint of the criterion subscale (on a 7-point scale) has served in many studies as the cutoff point to differentiate between people who are passionate from people who are not (e.g. Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011; Donahue, Rip, & Vallerand, 2009; Vallerand & Houffort, 2003). Furthermore, the discriminant validity of the subscale has been examined in a developmental study (Mageau et al., 2009, Study 3). Using this criterion, the researchers have found that only 36% of high school students who had never attended music classes showed at least a moderate passion for music after five months of music studies. This result suggests that even with a cut-off point as low as the center of the passion criterion subscale, the vast majority of individuals do not form a passion towards an activity. In addition, the development of a passion towards an activity seems to be preceded by the incorporation of this activity into the self. Evidence for this process was reported in the same set of studies

(Mageau et al., 2009), where it was found that these students who developed a passion towards music differed from those who did not develop a passion in that they were more inclined to integrate music as part of their student's identity early in the course of the term.

The way people incorporate their loved activity into the self will qualify the type of passion they develop. In autonomy-supportive social environments, an autonomous internalization of the activity is likely to occur, evolving into harmonious passion (HP). With HP the person freely chooses to be involved in a project for the mere pleasure of activity engagement, because of the intrinsic enjoyment the activity conveys. On the contrary, obsessive passion (OP) arises from a controlled internalization, which develops in more controlling environments. When people are obsessively passionate, they participate in their beloved activity because of internal or external pressure and often feel the obligation of persisting in it, even when they experience negative consequences. Recently, Mageau et al. (2009) have performed a series of studies that examined the social determinants of passion. The authors found that perceived autonomy support from parents and music professors/sport coaches was higher for participants who displayed a harmonious passion than for those who had an obsessive passion towards their activity. These results have been replicated in different contexts: with objective measures of social support (as assessed by the social agent rather than by the participant, Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, Donahue, & Lorimer, 2008; Mageau et al., 2009, Study 2), in a 5-month longitudinal study (Mageau et al., 2009, Study 3), and with younger participants performing various activities (Mageau et al., 2009, Studies 2 and 3).

Harmonious and obsessive passions have been linked to numerous outcomes (see Vallerand, 2010, for a review). HP has been related to higher levels of well-being, of life satisfaction and to the experience of flow during and after the activity. On the other hand, OP, but not HP, has been linked with interpersonal dissension and conflicts with other life activities, with lower levels of life satisfaction and compromised general well-being. Obsessively passionate students in turn seem to display higher levels of both approach- and avoidance- performance goals (Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008). In the same set of studies, both HP and OP have been associated to performance. However, the pathway to performance seems more positive in HP than in OP, the former also being associated with adaptive goal settings, learning strategies and well-being. In summary, research has shown that HP seems to induce mostly positive psychological and behavioral consequences, while the effects of OP are less positive and at times even negative.

One of the core outcomes associated with the Dualistic Model of Passion is persistence, conceptualized in most studies as long term engagement towards the loved activity (Vallerand, 2008, 2010; Vallerand et al., 2003). When positive psychological consequences are experienced, harmoniously passionate people persevere in their activity. They show a flexible commitment and are able to keep their life balanced between their preferred activity and other important life domains (Vallerand et al., 2003). Conversely, obsessively passionate people feel an internal pressure to continue and thus display rigid engagement, even if they experience unfavorable conditions during or after the activity. For instance, one study has shown that cyclists who display an obsessive passion are more likely than harmoniously passionate individuals to continue cycling in dangerous conditions during the cold Canadian winter (Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 3). The role of passion in educational persistence per se has not yet been investigated.

### 1.3. *The role of autonomy support and passion in educational persistence*

The previous-mentioned literature on autonomy support and passion provides a conceptual framework for the study of educational persistence, defined as students' intentions to persist (subjective persistence) or retention rates (objective persistence). Overall, this research has shown that HP derives from an autonomous

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