

## A Nondefensive Personality: Autonomy and Control as Moderators of Defensive Coping and Self-Handicapping

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Previous work (Knee & Zuckerman, 1996) found that the combination of high autonomy and low control was associated with fewer self-enhancing attributions after success and fewer self-protective attributions after failure. The present research again found strong support for a synergistic effect of causality orientations on defensive behavior through a prospective examination of defensive coping strategies (e.g., denial, behavioral disengagement, and mental disengagement) and self-handicapping tendencies. Individuals who were high in autonomy and low in control engaged in less defensive coping strategies (particularly denial) and exhibited less self-handicapping compared to all other individuals. The present findings support the proposition that self-determined individuals are less defensive in their behavior compared to others. Implications for self-determination theory as well as the controversy over the relation between positive illusions and well-being are discussed. © 1998 Academic Press

Several psychologists have long argued that optimal psychological development is characterized by authentic emotional experience and the absence of illusions and psychological defenses (Deci, 1980; Jahoda, 1958; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961, 1970). This notion gave rise to much theoretical work but relatively little research (Gray, 1986; Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, Gold, & Kuehnle, 1985; Valle & Koeske, 1974). Furthermore, a potent con-

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troversy has ensued between those who argue that positive illusions and defensive strategies are beneficial to well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994) and those who argue the opposite (Block & Colvin, 1994; Colvin & Block, 1994). The present work approaches this ongoing debate not by examining health implications of illusions, but by investigating whether self-determination, a quality of psychological growth, is indeed associated with less defensive and illusory tendencies.

One reason that constructs associated with organismic growth have received little empirical attention may be that adequate instruments that can identify growth-oriented individuals were developed only recently. One such tool is the General Causality Orientations Scale (GCOS) (Deci & Ryan, 1985a), which evolved from the assumption that people differ in the extent to which they regulate their behavior according to autonomy and control orientations. Autonomy-oriented behaviors are based on a sense of choice and awareness of one's needs; control-oriented behaviors are based on pressures to perform (either real or imagined). For each person, the GCOS yields two scores, one for each orientation.<sup>1</sup> Based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1987, 1991), optimal psychological development depends on the experience of choice (autonomy) and the absence of pressures (control). The present work examined prospective effects of autonomy and control orientations on defensive coping. It was predicted that organismically integrated individuals, those with high scores on autonomy and low scores on control, would display less defensive coping.

Previous research has revealed that the autonomy orientation, as measured by the GCOS, is positively correlated with ego-development, self-esteem, and self-actualization, and negatively correlated with self-derogation and hostility (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). In addition, autonomous individuals show greater consistency among their attitudes, traits, and behaviors (Koestner, Bernieri, & Zuckerman, 1992), persist confidently toward their goals (Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994), report focusing on enjoyment and challenge in the workplace (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994), and rarely experience boredom (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). In contrast, the control orientation has been shown to correlate positively with the type-A coronary-prone behavior pattern and public self-consciousness and is associated with the adoption of a pressured, ego-involved stance toward achievement tasks (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). In addition, controlled individuals exhibit less consistency among their attitudes, traits, and behaviors (Koestner *et al.*, 1992) and tend to regulate their behavior according to external rather than internal cues (Scherhorn & Grunert, 1988).

The first investigation of autonomy and control orientations as determi-

<sup>1</sup> The GCOS also measures impersonal orientation which corresponds to the amotivating aspect of events, but this dimension was not of theoretical interest in the present study.

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