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POINT COUNTERPOINT

Motivating People to Work: The Value Behind Diverse Assumptions

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ABSTRACT Agency theory and self-determination theory have contrasting assumptions about what motivates human beings and, accordingly, suggest differing methods of motivating others – from extrinsic rewards aimed at controlling agency to facilitating human agentic behaviour. These different assumptions are consequential – organizations and societies would look wildly different with the adoption of the one or other perspectives, with important implications for human welfare and wellbeing. The introduction to this *Point* and *Counterpoint* (PCP) calls on prominent scholars in both perspectives to clarify as well as question their assumptions about human motivation. An invitation to take a step back and clarify one's beliefs with precision, elucidating both the ideas and the data they are based on. At the same time, this PCP constitutes an invitation to explore how one's own personal preferences or values might be guiding their own (selection of) research and argumentation. We hope such internal reflection and external dialogue moves the conversation from us-versus-them to shared passion, from contradictory to paradoxical, and from stalemates to practical solutions that are sufficiently integrative to address today's complex societal challenges.

Keywords: agency, integrative complexity, intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, paradox, self-determination, value diversity

PREACHING IN A BROAD CHURCH

The *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS) prides itself as a generalist journal with a rich theoretical tradition (Healey et al., 2023) inclusive of a plurality of perspectives (Wickert et al., 2024) on topics that interest a wide variety of people (Wickert et al., 2021). Accordingly, it invites papers from micro- meso- and macro-scholars, across different disciplines (e.g., economists as well as psychologists) having different

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ideological beliefs (e.g., capitalist as well as socialist), and doing research based on different philosophical positions (e.g., positivist as well as interpretivist). Inviting such diverse perspectives under one intellectual roof is not always easy, with scholars – sometimes fiercely[1] – arguing opposite sides of the debate, but this intellectual pluralism is equally necessary as management studies are inherently at the intersection of different fields of interest. In this regard, JMS is often referred to as a 'broad church' where different parties can preach as long as they respect the plurality of beliefs. What is more: Editors at JMS will often ask authors to be clear about the theoretical assumptions underlying their work and will challenge them to consider how opposing theoretical, epistemological, or ontological perspectives could enrich their thinking (Healey et al., 2023).

The pluralistic intellectual tradition (and forward-looking vision) of JMS has consequences for those who wish to publish in the journal. As stated in a recent editorial message: *When writing your paper for JMS, consider you are doing a job talk that doesn't just target one department or subdiscipline – you need to tailor that job talk to the business or management school as a whole* (Leroy, 2022). Using that perspective, you will have a diverse audience: from strategy, operations, behavioural economics … as well as organizational behaviour and human resources scholars. Knowing that you will be addressing a large crowd of diverse perspectives will likely make you stop and reflect on your own assumptions, make them more explicit and go into extra care to back up those assumptions with relevant data. Indeed, when faced with scepticism, the burden of proof is potentially higher than when addressing a crowd of 'believers' (Vongswasdi et al., 2023).

You will likely also engage in more perspective taking to consider how others may view the problem and adjust your own narrative to reframe the problem from their perspective. You are not just promoting your own conversation, you are entering and attempting to contribute to their conversations (Healey et al., 2023) – so it is wise to read some of their work, especially those that relate to your topic of interest. What language is being used to describe this topic? Do words have exactly same meaning? What are some of the taken-for-granted principles? An example: The topic of identity may have widely different interpretations depending on intellectual traditions (Caza et al., 2018). In this PCP we zoom in on differing assumptions around why and how people are motivated to work – with work motivation being a topic discussed in a wide variety of disciplines (i.e., OB, HRM, accounting, finance, marketing, operations, economics, sociology).

A BRIGHTER AND DARKER TAKE ON HUMAN AGENCY

One of the pertinent and core discussions at JMS is about how leaders[2] can motivate others to contribute towards a collective goal – a question of great theoretical but also of great practical relevance. However, assumptions about how to motivate others, and even more fundamentally different assumptions about what drives human beings, can differ significantly between people. For instance, Douglas McGregor (1960) noted that people employ two fundamentally different ways of viewing human beings, Theory X versus Theory Y. Theory X has an economical view on human beings as rational actors

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who are motivated by incentives and kept in bound by control mechanisms. Theory Y however has a more psychological and developmental view that assumes human beings are naturally and intrinsically motivated to work and will do so under the right conditions. Theory X and Y are pitted against each other as extreme alternatives on the same spectrum (Sy, 2010; Veestraeten et al., 2021).

This Point Counterpoint highlights some of the fundamental theorizing on these perspectives (i.e., Theory X and Y) as well as decades of empirical research that speaks to the value of both theoretical perspectives as distinct ways to motivate other human beings. Specifically, we discuss literature on agency theory (AT) and self-determination theory (SDT) as two prominent ways to understand how to motivate employees. Both approaches have been widely popular – by 2024 a seminal piece on SDT had been cited 14,819 times (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and a seminal AT paper 27,437 times (Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

Both AT and SDT focus on the same key construct: human agency. SDT views human beings as naturally inclined towards agency – to be self-determined means to be agentic in one's activities. However, what if that self-determined person becomes responsible (i.e., becomes an agent) for someone else's assets; wealth, property, status, ideas, … (e.g., a manager of a company)? Then one could argue that one's own agentic course may be at odds with the agency of the shareholders of the firm – a loss of agency from one party to the other (Shaw, 2024 – this PCP). SDT would counter that such agency need not be lost as individuals can become autonomously motivated towards the organization's goals (Gagne and Hewett, 2024 – this PCP), for instance through a shared purpose, surpassing the self-interested values of both parties. The heart of the debate between AT and SDT is thus not the existence or importance of agency, but a darker (AT) and brighter (SDT) view on the role of agency in human motivation.

Beyond the use of the word agency, what differs here more are fundamentally different humanistic assumptions, about how humans are wired and motivated. For instance, people can be seen as primarily extrinsically/egocentrically motivated (theory X, agency theory) or primarily intrinsically/socially motivated (theory Y, self-determination theory). Relatedly, there is a different view on one's propensity to trust other human beings (Mayer et al., 1995) – with one view suggesting a lower trust and the need for contractual obligations and control through incentive schemes (AT) and the other view suggesting high trust and psychological safety where people can be themselves (SDT). Moreover, SDT would advocate for the assumption that human beings can learn and develop not only in their capabilities but also their values and ideas (e.g., an incremental mindset or learning goal orientation; Dweck, 1999) while AT assumes humans are prewired towards certain values and ideals. Next, I will argue that these differences in humanistic assumptions between both perspectives can be better understood from a value lens.

FROM VALUE OPPOSITION TO PARADOXICAL VALUES

Values are defined as desired end states (Maierhofer et al., 2002; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992) – a goal that people desire in such an important way that they organize

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their life and work in a manner to achieve those values. For instance, if material wealth, status, and social recognition are your primary drivers, you will organize your life differently than when equal opportunity and self-direction are your primary drivers. Within the Schwartz value framework (Schwartz, 1999), AT seems to assume people are more driven by *self-enhancing* values aimed at bettering one's own position, SDT assumes people are driven more by *self-transcendent* values aimed at surpassing one's own self-interest towards benefitting others.

One of the reasons why a value-lens might be useful here is because – perhaps ironically so – efforts to map the diversity of human values try to avoid being value-laden. In other words, this body of work tries to descriptively map the diversity of values rather than normatively promote one perspective.[3] From a descriptive standpoint, one approach is not better, values just offer different perspectives on what motivates human beings.

Self-enhancing (AT) and self-transcendent (SDT) values are fraught with tension: The perceived psychological distance between both seems great (Schwartz, 1999). However, this does not mean they are mutually exclusive of each other.[4] Thinking around paradoxes (Faems and Filatotchev, 2018; Smith and Lewis, 2011) suggests that it might actually be possible to combine these two values when seeing them as complementary not oppositional (Kim et al., 2023). From a paradox perspective (Volk et al., 2023), the same might be true of autonomy and control: we need some boundaries to thrive in our autonomy and we need some autonomy to appreciate the value of these boundaries (e.g., life goals or societal norms). Indeed, the word autonomy might not exist without the word control – the fact that human beings can be controlled makes autonomy more important and salient. I would therefore argue that AT and SDT are not opposing perspectives, but symbiotic, where an overreliance on one perspective necessitates the pendulum to swing to the other. So rather than a contradiction I would label this as a paradox. From this view, it is not about one approach normatively 'winning' but about navigating the paradox in the best possible way (Faems and Filatotchev, 2018).

Navigating the paradox between AT and SDT is important as organizations and societies at large continue to struggle to find the best way to harmoniously nurture the values of both autonomy and control. For instance, proponents of AT have been highly influential in the construction of global economies, financial markets, governmental regulations and corporate incentive schemes (Gagne and Hewett, 2024). At the same time, there is a countermovement within AT to go beyond the instrumental view on human beings as intrinsically engaged in purposeful and prosocial behaviour (Shaw, 2024). Navigating this paradox requires a tug-of-war at different levels of analysis: a more macro-perspective on ensuring adequate control at the systems level and a more micro-perspective that advocates for human self-determination (Buengler et al., 2018). The conclusions of this conflict are consequential: The amount of resources dedicated to incentivizing agents is immense, as is the human energy spend towards purpose, drive, and finding one's path. Are these actions money and energy well spent? One nice example of theorizing this cross-level paradox is the paper of Howard (2024) in JMS where he examines evidence on the success (or failure) of a guaranteed basic income for people worldwide. His paper makes a compelling case

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that research would support the implementation of this economic strategy, however counterevidence and deeply ingrained counter-assumptions offer a completely different story and proposed societal solution. Howard's paper offers a perspective rooted in both SDT and AT and helps to bridge both perspectives. It embraces a point of agreement represented by the contributions to this PCP, that 'management researchers, economists, and organizational decision-makers should eschew simplistic assumptions and recognize that people are motivated by things beyond rational self-interest' (Shaw, 2024).

EVIDENCE-BASED TACTICS FOR ADDRESSING VALUE DIFFERENCES

Imagine a task force, with significant resources, mandated to (re)organize organizations and societies to maximize welfare. In this task force, we would invite advocates of both AT and SDT to come together and find solutions. Is the effort doomed to fail? Will it come to a stalemate 'agree to disagree' or is there a way for both parties to have a constructive debate that leads to solutions that are better than had we filled the team with people from a singular perspective?

Past research has shown that religions, country cultures, political parties, and academics, can differ quite strongly in the values that they adhere to (Sagiv and Schwartz, 2022). Furthermore, we know that debates between opposing values can be quite intense and often lead to polarization towards extreme points of view that move away from the other perspective (Dimant, 2024; Fukuyama, 2018; Goren et al., 2009; Noury and Roland, 2020). In our attempts to convince the other party, we become more extreme in our own opinions and selectively find information to support our perspective (Ball et al., 2017; Lazer et al., 2018). Reducing cognitive dissonance would further make us reason away an alternative perspective (Festinger, 1962) as these are not just opinions about the world but they become deep-rooted beliefs that are intimately connected to our identity (i.e., who we are). Any (perceived) attack on our identity is likely to be met with resistance and conflict that creates an ingroup compared to an outgroup. In sum, there are many reasons to think that a debate between the two fundamentally differing perspectives represented in this PCP is a recipe for disaster. However, at the same time, research would suggest that a constructive debate is more likely in the presence of a number of factors: (1) the quality of information discussed, (2) the attitude of the team members, and (3) the overall created environment. I suggest these factors have guided the contributions to this PCP and should be embraced by scholars wishing to navigate these paradoxical values.

First, ideally facts (i.e., data supporting theory) speak louder than opinions. While there are strongly held preferences for the different motivational perspectives inherent in AT and SDT, a constructive debate is ideally based on what research suggests can maximize welfare. Surely the truth will surface when going over the collected evidence? And should we as scientists not be driven by facts and their underlying truth, regardless of our own preferences? I think many academics would agree with the perspective that ultimately truth should and will prevail while acknowledging that the 'truth' does not present itself readily or easily.[5] There is a wealth of data that

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speaks in favour of both AT and SDT – often collected in different disciplines and conversations – and research suggests human biases will guide our selection of data and 'truth' (Edmondson and Smith, 2006). Considering such selection bias and motivated reasoning, it is more important to find empirical evidence that convinces the other party (rather than serves to validate oneself). I encourage authors on the topics of this PCP to focus less on building their own case and more on incorporating the perspective of others: How can this particular idea or finding extend or refine my theorizing? Research on curiosity (Lievens et al., 2022) suggests that there is something valuable to be found in entertaining alternative ideas completely different to one's own (Grant and Berry, 2011). Curiosity however is not just the burden of the listener. The presenter equally has a role to play to pique the other's curiosity. This requires perspective taking to present the right information to maximally intrigue the other party. If the data are not strong, the arguments not compelling, or the starting assumptions too far removed, it will be harder to get the other party interested.

Second, the attitude of the person entering the debate matters a lot to whether the debate will be construed positively. Substantial research has indicated that if people have a fundamental belief in the value of diversity (Homan et al., 2015; Leroy et al., 2021; Van Knippenberg et al., 2013) there is a higher likelihood of being open to oppositional perspectives. There are established techniques to overcome one's own preference and show openness to alternative perspectives. Table I provides an overview of some of the evidence-based suggestions of how to best deal with opposing perspectives at the (1) personal, (2) interpersonal, and (3) team level (see also Gebert et al., 2017 for an overview of other tactics).

At the personal level, several tactics help awareness of one's own value perspective. For instance, by considering whether you always walk your talk (external feedback really helps to accurately assess this), you begin to understand that your own behaviour is likely a consequence of multiple values or motives (i.e., Simons, 2002; Simons et al., 2022). Deconstructing the origins of one's own values one develops humility towards one's own value stance (Chintakananda et al., 2023; Smith and Kouchaki, 2018), and fosters an appreciation of one's own values might have been extrinsically driven or represent contradictions. Reflecting on what one has learned from someone with opposing values, long after the intensity of a particular conflict with them, one cultivates an openness to future diverse encounters (Vongswasdi et al., 2023). These tactics highlight ways that individuals can become less entrenched in their own perspective, and more open to others. At an interpersonal level, to frame the communication of one's values towards others, it is important to take the perspective of the other party and adapt to the language of the audience you intend to reach. For instance, one can reframe the message to better align with the language of the morals that the other party holds dear (Feinberg and Willer, 2015). While this may not always be easy, there are always some shared values that you can align with. Similarly, it is wise to avoid language that suggests a moral issue (i.e., attacking the other's moral identity) but instead frame it as an opportunity to tackle a shared goal (Detert and Ashford, 2015), and to validate the other person's emotions relating to the issue (Benitez et al., 2020). Finally, I would advocate to reframe differing values not as an opposition of perspectives but a paradox (Clark et al., 2019). This removes

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Table I. Personal, interpersonal, and group tactics for constructive value debates

Label	*Description*	*References*
Personal tactics		
1. Behavioural integrity: Practicing what you preach	State the general principle you belief in general? Do you also walk that talk? What are areas in life where you practice but do not preach? Why is that the case? How does that refine your value?	Simons et al. (2022)
2. Moral humility: Going back on one's value timeline	Consider the 'timeline' of one's own values – when did one's ideas first start to form? Who were influential figures? What has been taken for granted? What have you carefully made your own?	Smith and Kouchaki (2018)
3. Diversity beliefs: Keep your enemy closer	Imagine someone you have interacted with a long time ago that held this opposing perspective. What do you admire about them? What have you learned from them?	Vongswasdi et al. (2023)
Interpersonal tactics		
4. Moral reframing: Use their language!	Can you reframe your position using language and values from the other party?	Feinberg and Willer (2015)
5. Issue Selling: Be an ally not an enemy	Refrain from using language that triggers morality but instead frame it as an opportunity to the other party.	Detert and Ashford (2015)
6. Paradoxical framing: Search shared passion.	What are both parties passionate about? What goal and underlying value do both parties agree on that surpasses this specific problem?	Smith and Lewis (2011)
Group tactics		
7. Psychological safety: Exchange differences	Is there a group environment that is inclusive of all opinions – no matter how opposing? Can individuals present their full selves – no matter how different?	Edmondson (1999)
8. Information elaboration: Elaborate on difference	Is the information presented carefully explored and elaborated to help make better decisions?	Van Knippenberg and Van Ginkel (2022)
9. Integrative complexity: Integrate differences	Are opposing perspectives sought out and integrated into a coherent overall whole?	Tetlock (1986)

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the assumption of contention and puts both parties in the mindset of trying to resolve tensions.

Finally, awareness of the group environment and whether that group environment is conducive to bringing out and bridging different perspectives is important in navigating paradoxical values. This differs from interpersonal tactics geared towards influencing others to building a shared understanding, instead focusing on creating a climate conducive to solving the problem at hand. This requires a team climate that enables diverse perspectives to be represented (psychological safety, Edmondson, 1999), the need to elaborate on those diverse perspectives by the team as a whole (information elaboration, Van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007) and the need to actively integrate perspectives, seeking out opposition with the intent to resolving them (Brodbeck et al., 2020; Park and DeShon, 2018). In following these team-focused (as well as the personal and interpersonal) tactics there is a higher likelihood that we start bridging diverse assumptions.

These tactics and conditions provide some practical advice for scholars to address potentially conflicting values represented in the motivation theories discussed in this PCP. Finding ways to bridge diverse assumptions is essential: research on integrative complexity (Tetlock, 1986) would suggest that opposing points of views are necessary to tackle the world's messy and complex problems.[6] Increasingly, our society is filled with wicked problems that involve multiple layers of complexity and inherent contradictions that need to be overcome (Brown et al., 2022; Heifetz, 1994). As Gagne and Hewett (2024) highlight in this PCP, a more complex account of human motivation is needed to address the ethical, societal, and socio-economic issues facing individuals and organizations. To successfully master these 'grand societal challenges' requires us to move beyond a singular right answer and adopt and integrate a plurality of perspectives, as Shaw (2024) echoes in his contribution: '… to advocate for one motivation theory over another does not reflect the motivational realities within organizations. No motivation theory in isolation can capture the complexity'. We hope that this PCP on agency theory and self-determination theory can overcome some of the historical opposition to come towards integrative solutions.

CONCLUSION

Proponents of agency theory and self-determination theory seem to be speaking against rather than with each other, in different threads of conversations. Through this PCP we want to connect both streams of thinking and invite them to engage in a constructive debate. This is important as the question 'how can we best motivate employees?' is very consequential with a lot of human energy and societal wealth either generated or lost. We hope these perspectives may inspire anyone from either camp to adopt a more nuanced thinking on the topic and to come to practical solutions that are better equipped to address the complexity of this world.

More broadly, this PCP offers some guidelines on how to deal with opposing perspectives. This is not just an ideology of intellectual pluralism that jumps on the bandwagon of promoting diversity and inclusion. Proposing evidence-based tactics, I suggest that bridging opposing values is not only possible, it is imperative to help solve today's

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problems not only in a way that many can support but also that a bridge across opposing assumptions will lead to better solutions.

Beyond better addressing the world's problems, we believe that bridging across assumptions will help readers become more successful as academics. And this is not just in your job talk (where you have to connect with a wide range of audiences) or your interaction with practitioners (where you have to connect with a wide range of people). Efforts at revealing and bridging across assumptions will build a broader theoretical base to your ideas and thus increase the intended audience of your paper and thus your potential impact. In other words, when you effectively integrate diverse perspectives, a diversity of scholars, from diverse disciplines, may cite your work. And doing so can feel very intrinsically rewarding as well.

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NOTES

[1] One example is a special issue on 'Atlas Unplugged' in JMS that reimagined the prospects of capitalism for business and society (Chowdhury, 2021; Chowdhury et al., 2022). JMS received some criticism for this call for papers as suggesting a potentially one-sided view of the debate. Shortly after, JMS offered a SI call for papers on property rights theory, which invited papers from the other side of this debate (Alvarez et al., 2023). This philosophy of intellectual pluralism is especially clear in the *Point-Counterpoint* format where authors are asked to engage in a constructive debate about a potentially contentious topic.

[2] I use the word leader here broadly. Not intended to refer uniquely and specifically to leadership research but more broadly to any attempt at influencing or motivating others – this can be done by individual leaders, larger collectives, design characteristics, policies and procedures … I consciously opt for the word leader to highlight that often attempts to influence are the result of human decisions, i.e., there are one or more human beings attempting to *motivate* others.

[3] Normative research is for instance quite common for leadership research (Fischer and Sitkin, 2023; Mumford et al., 2009). Over the decades no less than 123 different approaches to leadership have been proposed (Zheng et al., 2023), all with quite different assumptions about how to motivate human beings. For instance, the assumptions about motivating leaders will be different from empowering leadership to paternalistic leadership to controlling leadership. Leroy et al. (2018) was able to map these varying leadership perspectives on a value framework, showing that values do a good job at mapping the diverse ways in which leaders could motivate followers.

[4] There are various perspectives that argue that both values can be combined effectively. For instance, research on hybrid organizations focuses on how companies as well as individual leaders (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Battilana and Dorado, 2010) combine both people/planet (self-transcendence) and performance/profit (self-enhancement) values effectively. Furthermore, creativity scholars (Amabile, 1993; Zhou and Hoever, 2023) argue that creativity at work can be motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic values. Finally, leadership researchers have long acknowledged that both control and autonomy are means to motivate employees. For instance, the well-used MLQ framework suggested that both transactional (control) and transformational (autonomy) approach to leadership are necessary to maximize human motivation (Bass and Bass, 2009c). Research on paradoxical leadership further highlights how leader can effectively combine autonomy and control at the same time (Zhang et al., 2015).

[5] For more on truth in management research readers might also be interested in another Point-Counterpoint, from Watson (2011) and Van Maanen (2011).

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[6] A nice example here is the development of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Glaser and Strauss started from decidedly distinct (some might argue opposing) perspectives in developing grounded theory. Whereas Glaser was immersed in logical positivism (with the assumption that truth can be discovered), Strauss was immersed in pragmatic thought (with the assumption that truth is relative). Grounded theory emerged from two researchers overcoming their own perspective towards a new perspective that is now commonly used in science.

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