

Predicting Enjoyment, Attachment and Engagement in PRSSA

an examination of motivation and psychological need-satisfaction

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This study applies the aspects of motivation and need-satisfaction as outlined in self-determination theory (SDT) to PRSSA. A survey of award-winning PRSSA members (n = 116) demonstrated that high levels of need-satisfaction and motivation serve as predictors of higher ratings of the PRSSA chapter and the PRSSA adviser. Furthermore, students who felt more intrinsically motivated to participate in PRSSA were more likely to state an intention to remain involved in the organization, ascend into roles of leadership and join PRSA upon graduation. Implications for organizational improvement are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

While many professional media organizations expect college students to receive some amount of experience during their education, few fields do more than public relations to ensure a smooth transition to the professional ranks. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) founded the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) in 1968 to "cultivate a favorable and mutually advantageous relationship between students and professional public relations practitioners" (www.prssa.org). Among the aims of this student society are an understanding of current theories and procedures of the profession. PRSSA works hand-in-hand with its parent group on a variety of projects (Cook, 2004), allowing students to learn a great deal about public relations before they make a career decision (Floris, 2004). This approach benefits both the students who are trying to assess their future in the field and professionals who are helping to grow the next generation of PRSA colleagues.

Research on the value of taking part in organizations like PRSSA has been both limited and incomplete. A number of studies have advocated a type of "magic bullet" theory on participation, in which participation itself is the predictor of positive outcomes. Persistence in participation indicates a sense of value and motivation, but failing to parse out the good and the bad experiences limits this research. Furthermore, no studies have examined specific activities or interactions that create positive ratings of these organizations. Educational research has already established a series of factors that predict positive classroom outcomes, including rapport and enthusiasm of the instructor (Best & Addison, 2000; Feldman, 1976; McCarthy et al., 2003). Those researchers demonstrated that simply being present and receiving information is not enough to provide for a good learning experience. To that end, it is clear that to better understand the value of professionally oriented student organizations, researchers must take a deeper look at what makes for a positive experience.

For more than two decades, researchers in the area of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000) have outlined a series of motivational forces and psychological needs that provide for positive experiences and personal growth. Research in this area has received support in many areas including medicine (Williams et al., 1998), teaching (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman and Ryan, 1981) and personal goals (Sheldon, 2002). On a collegiate level, SDT has shown promise in predicting positive experiential outcomes in medical school (Black and Deci, 2000) and college course evaluations (Filak & Sheldon, 2003; 2004).

These studies, taken as a whole, provide a solid foundation for an assessment of SDT as it applies to professional student organizations such as PRSSA. Our purpose here is to assess whether the psychological needs outlined in SDT predict positive ratings of members' experiences in student-professional organizations, using PRSSA as a model. We also plan to examine the type of motivation that members of these organizations possess and to what degree it predicts both a desire to remain active in the organization and an intent to join the professional chapter (PRSA).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation in Collegiate Activities – Academic scholars and college administrators have long held an understanding that students who engage in extracurricular activities are more likely to provide a positive assessment of their college experience. Abrahamowicz (1988) found that students who actively took part in extracurricular organizations connected to their universities in ways that nonmembers did not. He found that those who joined were significantly more positive in their ratings of relationships with faculty and other students. The members of student groups were also more likely to enthusiastically rate their college experience and less likely to say they wouldn't attend their current college if given the option of starting over.

Additional work on this topic has been sparse, but has reinforced the findings of Abramowicz's work. Scholars have repeatedly found that students who were more involved in college life were more likely to be satisfied with their college experience than those who were less involved (for example, Eklund-Leen and Young, 1977, and Pennington, Wilson and Zvonkovic, 1989).

A number of scholars have looked at other factors aside from the bonding experiences forged by extracurricular activities to determine why students would venture into their chosen profession. In this area, scholars have found evidence of a relationship between a positive experience and persistence in social development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the benefit to groups of incentives and a sense of cohesion (Hall, 1993), and membership to build resumes or mimic others with interests like their own (McCannon & Bennet, 1996). Other researchers (Polizzi & Ethington, 1998) also found support for the importance of participating in activities that match the students' career goals. Ford (2003) argues that students who receive

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the opportunity to put the classroom theory into professional practice are likely to feel more motivated and engaged with their field of study and career path.

Self-Determination Theory – Self-determination theory is an organismic theory that assesses positive outcomes with regard to levels of motivation and psychological need satisfaction. Researchers in this area have outlined various psychological needs that have predicted positive outcomes in a variety of arenas (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as well as a spectrum of motivation (Ryan & Connell, 1989) that measures the level of engagement individuals feel when undertaking an activity. This section will outline each of these components in turn.

Need-Satisfaction: SDT proposes that all humans require the satiation of three basic psychological needs for optimum functioning, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness. Unlike other theories (Maslow, 1970) the needs are not hierarchical, but instead are additive in nature. Ryan (1995) analogizes need satisfaction to the elements necessary to drive plant growth. Much like a plant requires sunlight, water and food, humans require satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs. While a plant can exist with limited or non-existent amounts of one or two of these items, to thrive all three must be present. The human experience is similar in that all three needs must be satisfied for the individual to flourish (Sheldon et al, 2001).

Autonomy is viewed as the need to be free of control and the desire to function under one's own volition (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need is not necessarily fulfilled when an individual can do whatever he or she wants, but rather when one feels as though he or she is an active participant in a task.

Competence is feeling effective within one's own environment. Humans have an innate desire to take on significant and meaningful challenges with the hopes of mastering them and moving on to other challenges (Stipek, 1988). This need is fulfilled when individuals feel they are being effective within their own environment and are making strides toward improvement.

Relatedness is a need to feel a meaningful connection between individuals as well as between individuals and the group. Some have theorized this to be a relationship akin to that of a parent and a child while others have argued that it is about mutual respect and caring. At the very least, relatedness requires a general understanding among participants and a lack of an authoritarian structure.

Hypothesis 1: Autonomy, competence and relatedness will independently predict positive evaluations of PRSSA.

Hypothesis 2: Autonomy, competence and relatedness will independently predict positive adviser evaluations.

Levels of Motivation: Above all else, SDT is a theory of motivation, thus the quality of motivation that individuals retain is of utmost importance. Ryan and Connell (1989) posited a four-step continuum that outlined the various forms of motivational forces under which an individual can operate. Briefly, external motivation is where an individual takes part in a behavior based on the compunction of others. Individuals operating under these motivational forces would not enact their behavior unless they were being forced to do so. Introjected motivation is when an individual acts under auspices that are not truly their own. While external motivation is forced upon an individual, introjected motivation is the result of a cognitive struggle, such as guilt. Identified motivation is one in which an individual does not truly appreciate the activity itself, but rather sees it as a means toward a positive out-

come. Intrinsic motivation is a desire to enact behaviors because of the enjoyment germane to the behavior itself. This form of motivation is best of the four, as it inspires individuals to persist in an activity without any outcome-based reward or external pressure. While the first three types of motivation (external, introjected and identified) require some sort of tangible outcome, identified is viewed as akin to intrinsic motivation as the individual feels choice in the activity and is motivated by more positive means.

Sheldon et al. (2003) argued that organizations should have a strong interest in assessing the types of motivation held by their members. By inspiring motivation that goes beyond simple reward-based responses, organizations can produce higher levels of "buy in" from their members, including higher levels of commitment to the organization and personal goals that are more internalized (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Sheldon and colleagues (2003) also argue that individuals who operate under more internalized or intrinsic motivation will be more likely to seek higher levels of understanding as to their purpose in the organization (as opposed to continuing with rote activities and limited understanding as to their integration with the larger organization).

Hypothesis 3: Individuals with higher levels of intrinsic motivation will be more likely to state an intention to persist in their association with the student and professional chapters of the organization.

METHODOLOGY

We surveyed 520 students who identified themselves as members of six of the seven chapters to win one of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) Dr. F.H. Teahan Chapter Awards in 2004. This annual award is designed to recognize the outstanding achievements of PRSSA chapters, its members, and advisers. These chapters were chosen for this study because of the presumption they represented that year's most outstanding chapters. Members from these chapters were solicited through their faculty advisers. The researchers provided each with suggested language for a recruitment letter and the link to the online survey.

We received 129 responses, a response rate of 25 percent. We eliminated those surveys for which participants responded to fewer than half of the questions, leaving us with 116 cases for analysis. Mean substitution was used to replace missing values. No more than 5 percent of the data in any single variable was replaced through this method.

The instrument was adapted from a previous study (Filak & Sheldon, 2004) and sought to assess levels of need-satisfaction and the nature of the participants' motivations as they took part in this organization.

Students' adviser and organization evaluations: Students were asked to rate their overall feelings about their experiences in PRSSA. Organization approval was defined with a two-item index ($\alpha = .92$) and adviser approval was operationalized similarly ($\alpha = .83$). These items are congruent with what students see when they fill out faculty evaluations and have been demonstrated to accurately represent an overall view of this type of experience (Filak & Sheldon, 2003).

Students' psychological need-satisfaction and self-determined motivation: The measure was based on the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (Ilardi, Leone, Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Each of the three variables, autonomy ($\alpha = .89$), competence ($\alpha = .83$) and relatedness ($\alpha = .81$) was comprised of three items.

In addition, we used a self-determination question-

naire, based on that of Ryan and Connell (1989), to assess what motivated students to participate in the organization. A four-item scale was used to measure the level of external, introjected, identified and intrinsic motivation the student felt toward involvement in PRSSA. To craft a motivational variable based on these items, we summed the external and introjected items and subtracted them from the summed score of the identified and intrinsic motivation items. Thus, more positive scores indicate a stronger intrinsic motivation while more negative scores represent an extrinsic or controlled sense of motivation.

Persistence and demographics: We also asked students how likely they thought they would be to continue in PRSSA, how likely they thought they would be to take on or persist in leadership roles and to what degree they thought they would continue in the professional chapter of this organization (Public Relations Society of America) upon graduation. A three-item scale was used to determine persistent behavior in the organization ($\alpha = .76$). Demographic information, including age, gender, number of semesters in PRSSA and year in school, was also collected.

RESULTS

Primary data analysis – A series of bivariate correlations were examined prior to beginning the regression analyses. We wished to ascertain to what degree mere participation would impact the desire to persist in the organization beyond the current semester. While this was not the key point of this study, the issue of whether or not current participation is enough to predict future participation has not been answered in the literature we reviewed above. Thus, we took this opportunity to examine these variables before proceeding to the crux of our study. Furthermore, we planned to examine the impact demographic variables would have on our variables of interest.

In examining the correlations between time spent in PRSSA and the intent to persist in the organization, no significant correlations were found. The number of semesters spent in PRSSA was not correlated with the desire to remain an active member, the desire to take on a leadership role or the desire to join PRSA upon graduation.

In reviewing the demographic variables, age, gender and years in school were not significantly correlated with any of the dependent or independent variables. Semesters spent in PRSSA was significantly correlated with numerous other variables and was thus retained for future statistical examinations.

Need satisfaction – Hypothesis 1 stated that autonomy, competence and relatedness would independently predict positive evaluations of PRSSA. A hierarchical regression, used to account for the presence of a potentially influential variable, was conducted with semesters in PRSSA accounting for one block of the regression and the three needs accounting for the second. The regression was strong and predictive (Full model Adj. R-square = .52) with autonomy ($\beta = .43$; $p < .001$) and competence ($\beta = .29$; $p < .01$) as significant predictors. Relatedness ($\beta = .11$, $p < .18$) was not significant in this regression and thus hypothesis 1 received partial support.

Hypothesis 2 stated that autonomy, competence and relatedness would independently predict positive adviser evaluations. Again, a hierarchical regression was used, with the number of semesters in PRSSA acting as the first block and the needs completing the second. The regression, again, was strong and predictive (Full model Adj. R-square = .43) with autonomy ($\beta = .29$; $p < .05$) and

relatedness ($\beta = .48$; $p < .001$) serving as significant predictors. Competence ($\beta = .01$; $p < .5$) was not significant and thus hypothesis 2 received partial support.

Self-determined motivation – Hypothesis 3 stated that individuals with higher levels of intrinsic motivation would be more likely to state their intention to persist in their association with the organization. A three-step regression was used in which the first block contained the number of semesters in PRSSA, the second contained the three self-determined needs and the final block contained the intrinsic motivation variable. While autonomy and competence were the only needs shown to impact persistence at a bivariate level ($r = .38$ and $.39$, $p < .05$, respectively), self-determination theory argues that all three needs are key to positive outcomes. Furthermore, the traditional SDT model has motivation predicting need satisfaction, which in turn predicts outcome. However, given Sheldon et al's (2003) analysis regarding the importance of self-determined motivation in producing higher levels of "buy in" the level and type of the students' motivation appeared to be more germane to this exploration.

Organization Approval

Overall, PRSSA is an excellent organization.
I would recommend this organization to a friend.

Adviser Approval

Overall, the faculty adviser provides excellent support to PRSSA.
I would recommend this adviser to a friend.

Autonomy

I feel like I had a lot of input in deciding how to participate in this organization.
I was free to express my opinions in this organization.
The adviser took my perspective into consideration in this organization.

Competence

I enjoy the challenges this organization provides,
Most of the time, I feel a sense of accomplishment from doing work for this organization,
I do not think the tasks I do for this organization are very stimulating. (reverse scale)

Relatedness

The adviser cares about me and my progress.
The adviser was generally friendly towards me.
I don't feel the adviser understood me. (reverse scale)

Motivation Items

External: You participate in this organization because somebody else wanted you to, or because the situation seemed to compel it,
Introjected: You participate in this organization because you would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if you didn't.
Internalized: You participate in this organization because you really believe that it's an important organization to belong to.
Intrinsic: You participate in this organization because of the enjoyment or stimulation that it provides you.

Organizational Persistence:

I plan to be an active member of PRSSA during my time in college.
I want to take on (or maintain) a position of leadership in this organization.
I plan to join PRSA when I graduate or when I become a member of the workforce.

The regression was predictive (Full model adj. R-square = .20) with the motivation variable acting as the key predictor ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 3 was supported.

A post-hoc analysis of the three items that made up the persistence variable was conducted to ascertain whether each item could be individually predicted with the intrinsic motivation variable. This analysis was an attempt to assess whether motivation in the student realm

would transcend to the professional realm or if two of the student items were inadvertently masking the third. Interestingly, the regression with the item pertaining to PRSA membership produced the highest beta weight of the three (beta = .32, $p < .01$; PRSSA leadership beta = .20, $p = .55$; plan to remain an active member of PRSSA beta = .20, $p < .05$). The implications of this finding are discussed below.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

One of the immediate benefits of applying self-determination theory to PRSSA is the solid theoretical framework it provides for studying the psychological needs of and motivational forces on PRSSA members. At the basic level, we find autonomy, competence and relatedness are key psychological needs being met by one's association with this pre-professional organization. But it's at the complex motivational level where SDT provides the most valuable insights.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 received partial support. This study found that autonomy and competence predicts group liking and autonomy and relatedness predicts adviser approval, fitting the pattern shown by Filak and Sheldon (2003 and 2004), i.e., all three variables were not present in the prediction of group and individual variables. In explaining their findings, Filak and Sheldon argued that every human being wants to feel free of another's control, to operate under one's own volition. Therefore, if one feels both the organization and the faculty adviser provide that autonomy, one will tend to approve of both. Both the correlation and regression analyses of this study have tended to bear out this supposition. Turning to the interrelationship of competence and relatedness, we can see that competence is important to liking an organization, as we feel like we're learning something for being involved in it, while relatedness is a more human characteristic.

No direct connection was found to length of association with PRSSA in terms of desire to remain an active

member, desire to take on a leadership role, or the desire to join PRSA upon graduation. This finding was surprising in terms of these high-performing chapters and seems to negate the premise that current participation is enough to predict future participation. This has significant value in future research and sets the table well for a discussion on how motivational forces can influence future participation.

However, hypothesis 3 was supported, in what is perhaps the most important finding from this study. Higher levels of intrinsic motivation predicted more than simple involvement and leadership in the student organization. It also appears to help us determine the level of involvement, intention to seek a leadership position and whether the individual intends to persist in their association with the organization.

Most importantly, the quality of motivation appears to also predict the intention of student members (PRSSA) to associate with their professional society (PRSA) after graduation. Understanding what makes student members "convert" their memberships to the professional organization can be especially helpful as disciplines look to the future of their professions. By discovering ways to help student members value the outcomes of their experience in the organization, organization advisers can encourage persistent membership, grow leaders and push forth the next generation of experts in their field.

This study also sets a positive foundation for future research that will allow discovery into the types of practical things student organizations, and advisers in particular, can do to sponsor more self-determined motivation. Grasping the important connection between intrinsic motivation and persistent affiliation with the organization will help advisers in their approaches to recruiting and retention. Tactics intended to force students to participate through "guilt trips" and other coercive techniques won't be successful in getting the end results any field ultimately wants and needs; loyal, lifetime members of the profession.

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