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SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY · INTRINSIC MOTIVATION · TECHNOLOGICAL UNEMPLOYMENT · AUTOMATION · MEANING OF
WORK · UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME · POST-SCARCITY · INTEREST-DRIVEN EDUCATION

The Intrinsic Advantage

Self-Determination, the Automation of Purpose, and the Case for Interest-Driven Education in a Post-Scarcity Economy

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THE DEEPER CASUALTY

Advanced automation threatens not just income. It threatens the institutional architecture that has manufactured purpose for most people across an entire lifetime.

JAHODA'S LATENT FUNCTIONS (1981)

Employment supplies five latent functions beyond income: time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status, and activity. A meta-analysis found each independently predicts mental health.

SOURCES Jahoda, American Psychologist, 36(2), 184-191 (1981); Paul & Moser, Journal of Vocational Behavior, 74(3), 264-282 (2009).

THE DISSOCIATION

A society could solve the income shock completely and leave the purpose shock entirely untouched. A check is a check. No transfer reaches what the wage was attached to: the structure that said, every day, that you were needed.

THE RETIREE DEMONSTRATION

The closest thing to a population-scale preview of structure removal we have is retirees with secured income.

Paul et al. (2023): people who leave the labor force with income secured remain nearly as deprived of the latent functions as the unemployed. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1017358.

A comfortable, well-funded purposelessness is still purposelessness. The gap between a solved income problem and an unsolved purpose problem grows wider precisely as the income side is handled well.

EARLY SIGNAL

Brynjolfsson, Chandar, and Chen (2025): sharpest automation effects falling on younger, entry-level workers in most externally structured occupations. The people most dependent on external scaffolding are first to lose it. Stanford Digital Economy Lab.

PART II

Intrinsic Motivation as Insulation

Self-Determination Theory and the selection criterion

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

The same economic event lands as liberation on one motivational orientation and as collapse on the other.

EXTRINSIC ORIENTATION

Engine is the external structure: deadline, performance review, paycheck, role. Remove the structure and the engine stalls. Competence and worth were always being certified by someone else.

INTRINSIC ORIENTATION

Engine is internal: the activity itself is absorbing. Carries the orientation across the transition intact because it was never resting on the economy in the first place. The structure was incidental.

THREE BASIC NEEDS (SDT)

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2017). When external structure is pulled away, people whose needs remain satisfied through something other than that structure tend to hold steady.

A SCALE-PREVIEW: THE PANDEMIC

For an extended period, large segments of the population had external structure stripped away with little warning. This approximated, crudely, the conditions of a structure-removed economy.

Avsec, Zager Kocjan, and Kavcic (2021): it was the distress of the lockdown itself, not the infection concerns, that shaped psychological functioning. The effect ran through satisfaction and frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 62(5), 717-724.

THE FINDING

When external structure was removed at scale, the people who held steady were the ones whose needs were met through something other than that structure. The people who came apart were relying on the structure to supply what they could not supply from within.

PART III

Making the Micro the Macro

Interest-driven education as the mechanism

THE ORIENTATION IS DEVELOPABLE

"An environment organized around self-chosen interest tends to produce adults whose motivation is internally organized."

Gray and Riley (2013): 232 unschooling families; parents reported gains in self-motivation, attitudes toward learning, and psychological wellbeing. *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, 7(14), 1-27.

ADULT OUTCOMES

Riley and Gray (2015): 75 grown unschooled adults. More than four in five pursued formal higher education. These adults described themselves in terms of self-direction and internally organized motivation. *Other Education*, 4(2), 33-53.

RYAN AND DECI (2020)

Autonomy-supportive teaching reliably predicts more internalized motivation and deeper engagement than controlling instruction. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101860.

At the precise moment external structure is being withdrawn from the economy, conventional schooling is optimizing the entire population to depend on it.

The standard model: externally set tasks, grades from outside, success defined by others. A machine for manufacturing extrinsic orientation.

The neurodivergent note: the monotropic profile, motivation that flows toward self-chosen interest, resists what is not, reads as deficit in a productivity-organized society. In a world where obligation is being withdrawn, it reads as adaptation.

Interest-driven education is not a fringe pedagogical preference. It is infrastructure. We are preparing people for the side of the coming purpose divide that does not survive it.

SOURCES Murray, Lesser & Lawson, *Autism*, 9(2), 139-156 (2005), on the monotropic profile.

WHAT THIS ARGUMENT DOES NOT CLAIM

The material question and the psychological question are independent problems. A solution to one is not a solution to the other.

This paper addresses only the psychological half: cultivating intrinsic motivation through interest-driven education prepares a person to retain a sense of worth when external structure is withdrawn.

It does not feed that person, house that person, or give that person any claim on the wealth that automation concentrates. An individual who is meaning-resilient and materially abandoned is not fine. That person is composed while deprived, which is not a solution to anything.

SOURCES Gilly, T. (2026), The Intrinsic Advantage, sec. VI; Frey & Osborne, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 114, 254-280 (2017).

The population that retains meaning after work is not handed down by nature. It is determined by how we develop people. That is a choice still open.

The choice has a deadline built into it. Orientation forms in development and cannot be installed in an adult during the week the layoff notice arrives. The relevant window is the childhood of the generation that will inherit the automated economy, which means the relevant window is now.

SOURCES Gilly, T. (2026). The Intrinsic Advantage. Real Safety AI Foundation, working paper (v5).

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