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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### DISPOSITIONAL AUTONOMY AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING AMONG WOMEN IN A COLLECTIVISTIC CULTURE

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#### Abstract

Autonomy has been conceived as a masculine trait in literature. However, feminist literature and SDT theorists consider autonomy as a requisite need for all irrespective of gender, class and culture. The Self-Determination Theory perspective posits autonomy as a basic psychological need and an essential nutriment for well-being. The aim of the present paper was to study the effects of dispositional autonomy on subjective wellbeing among women in Kashmir. The aim was to see the existence of this attribute among women being in collectivistic culture. The relationship of the dimensions of dispositional autonomy i.e., authorship/self-congruence, susceptibility to control and interest-taking with subjective wellbeing was examined and their effects on subjective wellbeing was studied. The 15-item, 5-point Likert Scale namely Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF) (Weinstein et al., 2012b) was used to assess dispositional autonomy. The 14-item, 5-point Likert Scale namely, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (S Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008) was used to assess subjective wellbeing. The study was conducted on a sample of 183 Kashmiri women. The correlation and regression analysis was done to study the relationship and effects of dispositional autonomy on subjective wellbeing among women in collectivistic culture. The results showed a significant positive effect of dispositional autonomy on subjective wellbeing of women. The study has contributed in the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the importance of autonomy as a basic psychological need in the wellbeing of women.

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#### Introduction:-

##### Autonomy and Dispositional Autonomy

Etymologically, autonomy refers to self-rule which includes the actions and behaviors initiated and maintained by a person willingly and wholeheartedly. Since autonomous behaviors are self-endorsed and reflective of the contexts, as a behavioral regulation autonomy is thus reflective (Frankfurt, 1971; Hill & Dworkin, 1992) mindful (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and integrative (Fisher, 1990; Friedman, 2006). Literature and research, concerning autonomy, in developmental psychology and parenting and social development (Baumrind, 1971) consider autonomy and self-regulation an important element for psychological development. Psychologists and philosophers find autonomy imperative for the healthy development of an individual. Considerable research suggests that autonomy has many

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positive outcomes in diverse contexts (Paradnikė & Bandzevičienė, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT literature has much deliberated on the construct of dispositional autonomy. Dispositional autonomy corresponds to having more autonomous orientation whereby an individual's behavior is self-initiated and self-organized (Weinstein et al., 2012a). The self-congruent and integrated behavior is only possible when an individual is wholeheartedly willing to act in accordance with one's values and feelings (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When an individual's behavior is not self-endorsed but stems from external contingencies like social pressures, it compromises the authenticity of the behavior (deCharms, 1981; Ryan & Connell, 1989). The important aspects underlying autonomy as a construct within self-determination theory include authorship/self-congruence, susceptibility to control and interest-taking.

**Authorship/self-congruence** as a characteristic of autonomy is authenticity as described in existential literatures. When individual experiences autonomy, he or she is the author of the behavior and the behavior is based on abiding values, needs, and interests (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research shows that individuals having authorship over their behaviors have greater consistency between their behaviors, attitudes and traits, eventually leading to more autonomous behaviors (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012a).

**Susceptibility to control** is the absence of pressures both internal and external as motivators of behavior (Deci et al., 1994). This underlying construct of dispositional autonomy characterizes as negative feature of autonomy. Individuals with low dispositional autonomy tend to have a lesser degree of personal choice and are less likely to be initiative (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein et al., 2012a). Low autonomous individuals perceive a lesser degree of personal choice and behave in response to pressures from others or self-imposed "have to's" and introjected pressures (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Empirical work shows that autonomous behavior is linked to resistance to external pressures and non-autonomous behaviors are governed by external or introjected regulations. The former has been shown to enhance wellbeing and the latter, i.e., high susceptibility to control thwarts overall wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein et al., 2012a).

**Interest-taking** as a facet of autonomy is the spontaneous tendency to openly reflect on inner and outer events, facilitating insight and awareness into one's experiences. Interest-taking has been found imperative for high level of self-governing involved in autonomy (Hmel & Pincus, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Interest-taking as an underlying construct of autonomy explains individual behavior governed by motivated attention to both positive and threatening experiences (Weinstein et al., 2013). Literature shows that individuals scoring high on this dimension happen to continuously explore themselves and tend to have fulfilling lives (Ryan & Deci, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012a).

### **Subjective wellbeing**

Wellbeing refers to an individual's capacity for optimal functioning. It entails aspects beyond physical health; it includes a sense of interest in one's surroundings and environment, a confidence to pursue significant goals and the motivation and zeal to face obstacles to achieve goals in order to flourish and maintain vitality in everyday life situations (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The conceptual framework of well-being originates from two broad conceptualizations- hedonism and eudaimonism (Ryan, Richard M; Deci, 2001). In hedonic view wellbeing consists of subjective happiness and pleasure/displeasure about the good and bad in life. This concept of wellbeing encompasses individual's cognitive and emotional evaluation of their life and has been referred to as subjective wellbeing in the literature. Thus subjective wellbeing includes affect balance i.e., predominance of positive over negative affect and a global satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 2015). On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach to psychological wellbeing discredits hedonia as an indicator of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Eudemonic wellbeing consists of more than hedonic pleasure meaning just being positively affective and satisfied doesn't entail psychological and social wellness. Eudaimonic wellbeing corresponds to living well and actualizing one's potentials, having orientation towards personal growth and the ultimate aim in life to strive to achieve one's potentials (Peterson & Park, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, eudaimonic well-being is considered to be a by-product of six dimensions of psychological well-being promoting self-realization. These six dimensions are self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose, and personal growth (Keyes et al., 2002). Lately, with advancement in theoretical understanding a combination of these two approaches have become popular claiming that well-being is defined as a psychological construct that includes both affect and psychological performance (Sarah Stewart-Brown, 2013). The present study also takes this position that a combination of both approaches is more relevant while studying wellbeing. Subjective well-being refers to a person's own assessment of overall well-being (Diener et al., 2015). In other words, it refers to subjective happiness of an individual; how an individual feels about his/her life. It is more than mere happiness, encompassing an

individual's overall evaluation of his/her lives. The evaluations including one's cognitive judgments, affective states including positive and negative feelings and states come in the domain of subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 2015).

### **Autonomy in women and collectivistic culture**

The ideal of autonomy is not much celebrated when it comes to collectivistic cultures. The idea corresponds more to individualistic cultures. However, there is a discourse among theorists and feminists about the ideal of autonomy being universal irrespective of the cultural orientation or gender and has been conceptualized as a basic psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In collectivistic cultures women choices are governed by social norms, their decisions regarding different life areas need assurance and approval from other family members, like guardian, husband or parents (Osamor & Grady, 2016). In such cultures autonomy an an ideal is not much endorsed. However, over the years, women have been found to strive and take charge of their decisions and themselves, in diverse life areas, thereby reclaiming their agency.

### **Rationale for Current Study:**

The literature suggests a significant relationship between autonomy and wellbeing (Ebersold et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein et al., 2013). Research indicates a significant role of different factors like economic independence (Banerjee, 2015), educational level (Osamor & Grady, 2016), socio-economic status, cultural orientation that plays a role in women's autonomy and their wellbeing. However, there is limited research related to dispositional autonomy and subjective wellbeing in women in collectivistic cultures. To understand factors that influence women's dispositional autonomy, current study suggests following hypotheses.

- H<sub>1</sub>: Dispositional autonomy is significantly related to subjective wellbeing in women.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Authorship/self-congruence has a significant positive effect on subjective wellbeing in women.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Susceptibility to control has a significant negative effect on subjective well-being in women.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Interest-taking has a significant positive effect on subjective wellbeing in women.

### **Methods:-**

#### **Participants and procedure**

The present study included women from different backgrounds of Kashmir. A total of 200 women were purposively selected for the study after their consent. All the respondents were ascertained of the confidentiality of their responses. The questionnaire was self-administered individually taking 10-15 minutes to complete. In total 200 responses were collected and only 183 responses were found fit for the further analysis. The participants were not given any monetary reward.

### **Measures:-**

#### **Scales used**

The scales used to measure the variables under study i.e., dispositional autonomy and subjective well-being were adapted from previously validated scales (S Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008; Weinstein et al., 2012b). The scales were administered in English language.

#### **Index of Autonomous Functioning**

The 15-item, 5-point Likert Scale namely Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF) (Weinstein et al., 2012b) was used to measure dispositional autonomy. The IAF provides a brief and reliable measure of trait autonomy based on three theoretically derived subscales/dimensions assessing authorship/self-congruence, interest-taking, and susceptibility to control. Participants were asked to mark all items on the 5-point Likert Scale where 1 meant 'not at all true' and 5 meant 'completely true'. In the present study Cronbach alpha of IAF scale was found to be 0.78.

#### **Subjective Wellbeing Scale**

Subjective wellbeing was measured using 14-item, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (S Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008). Participants were asked to mark all items on the 5-point Likert scale where score of 1 corresponded to 'none of the time' and the score of 5 corresponded to 'all of the time'. Cronbach alpha of the scale for present study was found to be 0.82.

### **Results and Discussion:-**

**Table 1:-** Correlations for all measures (N=183).

	1	2	3	4

Authorship	<b>1.00</b>			
Susceptibility to Control	-0.230**	<b>1.00</b>		
Interest-taking	0.408**	-0.338**	<b>1.00</b>	
Subjective wellbeing	0.548**	-0.497**	0.437**	<b>1.00</b>
□ □ Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

Table 1 represents Pearson's correlation between dimensions of dispositional autonomy i.e., susceptibility to control, authorship/self-congruence, interest-taking and wellbeing. Results revealed that authorship/self-congruence ( $r=0.548$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and interest-taking ( $r=0.408$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) are positively and significantly related with subjective wellbeing. With respect to susceptibility to control ( $r=-0.497$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), results showed significant negative correlation with wellbeing. The results show significant correlation of dispositional autonomy with subjective wellbeing signifying the acceptance of H1. Moreover, all the correlations are less than 0.8 which represents the discriminant validity and absence of multi-collinearity.

**Table 2:-** Summary of multiple regressions for authorship/self-congruence, susceptibility to control, interest-taking and subjective wellbeing.

Hypothesis	Causal Path	Beta coefficient	SE	t-value	sig.	Hypothesis Validation
H2	AUT → SW	1.227	0.183	6.700	<0.000	Supported
H3	SUS→SW	-0.968	0.161	-6.010	<0.000	Supported
H4	INT→SW	0.433	0.177	2.450	<0.015	Supported
Note: SE=standard error, $p < 0.01$ ; **, SUS: susceptibility to control, AUT: authorship, INT: interest-taking, SW Subjective wellbeing Adjusted $R^2=0.454$ , $R^2=0.463$ F=51.431						

Table 2 reports the results of multiple regression analysis of dimensions of dispositional autonomy and subjective wellbeing. Results revealed all dimension viz., susceptibility to control, authorship and interest-taking significantly predicted subjective wellbeing and the regression model is to be significant (Adjusted  $R^2=0.454$ ,  $R^2=0.463$ , F=51.431,  $p < 0.01$ ). Susceptibility to control ( $\beta=0.413$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), authorship ( $\beta=0.413$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and interest-taking ( $\beta=0.413$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) significantly predicted subjective wellbeing, signifying that all the hypotheses of the study stand accepted. Among all the dimensions, authorship/self-congruence plays a more significant role in shaping subjective wellbeing. The proposed model explained a 45% of total variance in subjective wellbeing.

### Discussion:-

The aim of this research study was to study the relationship between dispositional autonomy and subjective wellbeing among women. The present study also studied dispositional autonomy as predictor of subjective wellbeing. Furthermore, the association of the underlying dimensions of the variable i.e., authorship, susceptibility to control and interest-taking were studied. Both the association and effects of these underlying constructs with subjective wellbeing were studied. The correlation analyses showed a positive and significant correlation between dispositional autonomy and wellbeing among women. The results are in line with the previous researches (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012a). Results showed that dispositional autonomy is positively and significantly related to subjective wellbeing. Furthermore, results revealed that authorship and interest-taking were positively and significantly related to subjective wellbeing. The dimension susceptibility to control showed a significant negative relation with subjective wellbeing; implying women high on this dimension are less autonomous and have low subjective wellbeing. The results are consistent with previous studies (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein et al., 2012a). Results revealed that dispositional autonomy significantly predicted subjective wellbeing and the regression model is to be significant. The results showed that the proposed model explained 45% of total variance in subjective wellbeing. Among the dimensions, in the proposed model, authorship explained maximum variance, followed by susceptibility to control in opposite direction and then interest-taking. Thus, it follows from the results that dispositional autonomy is a significant predictor of subjective wellbeing among women. Building and providing supportive environments for women, where they can fully express their concerns, exercise their choices, explore their selves and resist external pressures are imperative for their subjective wellbeing. Explanation for this comes from the fulfillment of the basic psychological need of autonomy which causes an

individual to be more autonomous and in-charge of their circumstances with enhanced self-control skills (King et al., 2017). Such people exhibit self-regulated behavior which eventually enhances an individual's overall wellbeing.

### **Implications:**

The present study added to our understanding of the relationship between dispositional autonomy and subjective wellbeing among women in the collectivistic culture. First, the study provides evidence for the dispositional autonomy among women in collectivistic culture, thereby refuting the claims of non-existence of autonomy among women in collectivistic culture. Next, the study shows how dispositional autonomy among women explains their subjective wellbeing. These findings have implications for promotion of subjective wellbeing among women by enriching their environments and building spaces where they can be the authors of their behavior, resist unreasonable external pressures and be able to explore themselves in their environments optimally.

### **Conclusion:-**

The present study highlighted the role of basic dispositional autonomy in subjective wellbeing among women in a collectivistic culture. The study explains the underlying factors viz., authorship, susceptibility to control and interest-taking in relation to subjective wellbeing among women. It is found that women who score high on the dimension of authorship are more autonomous and subsequently have high subjective wellbeing. Also, the women who scored low on susceptibility to control predicted they were more autonomous and high on subjective wellbeing. Interest-taking also happened to influence subjective wellbeing as women scoring high on this dimension were more autonomous. All these results suggest that when women have experiences where they can exercise their choice and are in control of their actions and behaviors, have opinion on their interests and values and have set clear boundaries to external pressures are likely to feel satisfied with their lives and experience good overall wellbeing. Such women tend to experience more subjective happiness and fulfillment.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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