

THE ROLE OF AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION AND FULFILLMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS IN HAPPINESS AMONG THAI ELDERLY

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ABSTRACT

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Given the rapid growth of the aging population, many studies have investigated ways to improve the quality of life of senior citizens. Based on self-determination theory, fulfillment of the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are known to be sources of psychological well-being. Therefore, interactions or activities that could fulfill such needs are expected to bring happiness. This study attempts to develop effective strategies based on the role of autonomy-supportive communication in enhancing happiness among the elderly. Using a correlational study with convenience sampling and the snowball technique, 110 Thai participants aged 60–75 were recruited online and asked to complete a set of online questionnaires to assess autonomy-supportive communication, fulfillment of psychological needs, and happiness. The results from multiple regression analysis and PROCESS showed that autonomy-supportive communication (e.g., love, caring, words of admiration) positively predicted happiness. Specifically, such a positive effect was mediated by fulfillment of the need for relatedness and competence, i.e., older people who have autonomy-supportive communication with their significant others are likely to be happier, as such communication can satisfy their psychological needs. This suggests that words that reflect the elderly's positive relationship with others and their sense of competence could be significant sources of their happiness. The present study provides additional evidence and highlights the role of interpersonal communication in conveying a sense of relatedness and competence towards happiness for Thai seniors. Findings from this study may also contribute to social policy in generating initial guidelines for communicating with older adults.

Keywords: Autonomy; support; communication; happiness; aging population

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute (TGRI, 2021), Thailand has now become an aging society, with the elderly population comprising 18% of the Thai population in 2020. This development has changed the Thai population structure, especially as both birth and mortality

rates have gradually decreased. Moreover, it is predicted that life expectancy among the Thai population will increase to approximately 80 years old (The World Bank, n.d.). This has drawn attention and raised concerns about whether and how individuals in this vulnerable population can maintain their psychological well-being. Moreover, many organizations have sought ways to enhance happiness among elderly individuals.

Lothian and Philp (2001) investigated the caregiving system in senior citizen centers and found that autonomy played a key role in enhancing psychological well-being among elderly individuals. It is important to note that autonomy refers to the ability to control one's own decision and behaviors, as well as the acknowledgment of one's own dignity and self-respect. Prior studies have found that autonomy has a positive effect on psychological well-being (Nelson et al., 2015), i.e., the greater degree of freedom that senior citizens have to make decisions for themselves, the happier they are. This is consistent with recommendations from health organizations across the world that encouraging the older population to recognize their capacity to make decisions on their own would increase their self-respect, which would increase happiness.

Research has also shown that competence, or the ability to do things and manage the surrounding environment on one's own, is another factor that can enhance psychological well-being. Patrick et al. (2007) investigated factors that could improve psychological well-being by adopting self-determination theory emphasizing the fulfillment of fundamental psychological needs, including the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Their results showed that once senior individuals fulfilled these three basic needs, they became happier and had high levels of psychological well-being, i.e., older adults who feel free to make decisions for themselves, perceive themselves as capable of doing things independently, and have positive relationships tend to be happier.

Similar to autonomy and competence, social support and positive social ties are also known to help prevent elderly individuals from experiencing negative emotions, stress, and depressive symptoms (Okun & Keith, 1998). Those who participate in social activities are more likely to have high levels of happiness, well-being (Bell & Bell, 2012), and life quality (Chang et al., 2014; Silverstein & Parker, 2002). This is consistent with a study on the relationship between social participation and psychological well-being in Thai senior citizens' clubs, which found that participation in social activities (e.g., group exercise, meeting with friends) could promote life satisfaction (Annopkraisorn & Isaranon, 2020). In particular, the underlying mechanism for such a positive effect of social interaction through group activity participation was the fulfillment of needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In other words, older individuals who engage in social activities or have social interaction feel autonomous and sense their ability to do things independently while staying connected to their social networks. This suggests that positive social interaction and social participation could be channels to fulfill psychological needs in the aging population. As a result, people whose psychological needs are met are likely to be happy and satisfied with their lives.

These findings also align with Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which state that people who are 65 years old or older are likely to face life questions regarding whether they have had a successful life (Orenstein & Lewis, 2020). If the older generation can control and manage their own decisions, stay connected, and share their strengths and knowledge with others, then they are likely to achieve their personal development, resulting in greater happiness. Thus, social interaction or participation that can provide older people with individual autonomy, capacities, and relatedness competence should be encouraged to enhance their mental well-being.

Another line of research proposes that autonomy-supportive social communication is crucial for promoting psychological well-being within family and health care settings (Goethals et al., 2020; Hafskjold et al., 2017), i.e., positive communication that signifies support and autonomy could enhance happiness for the aging population because such communication provides necessary assistance for the elderly when facing difficulties, alleviates their anxiety and loneliness, and brings about a sense of relatedness. Specifically, research has also found that positive social interaction with relatives or neighbors can satisfy elderly people's psychological and social needs, which in turn yields happiness (Chen et al., 2019).

It is worth noting that Thailand announced a declaration on the aging population in 1999. The key point involves recognizing the dignity and self-esteem of older adults by asking related institutes to provide an opportunity for the elderly to consistently develop and increase their potential. However, concrete evidence in the Thai context is lacking. Moreover, although past studies have shown that fulfillment of psychological needs could promote happiness and well-being (Annopkraisorn & Isaranon, 2020; Kasser & Ryan, 1999; Souesme et al., 2016), little is known about how these basic needs could be practically utilized, especially when Thai senior citizens are likely to live in a multigenerational household.

Therefore, this study attempts to empirically explore social communication for promoting happiness among the Thai aging population. In particular, the present study aims to investigate whether and how autonomy-supportive communication with family members could elevate elderly people's happiness via the

fulfillment of three psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002), as shown in Figure 1.

It is hypothesized that autonomy-supportive communication would positively predict happiness among elderly individuals. Specifically, such prediction would be mediated by the fulfillment of the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

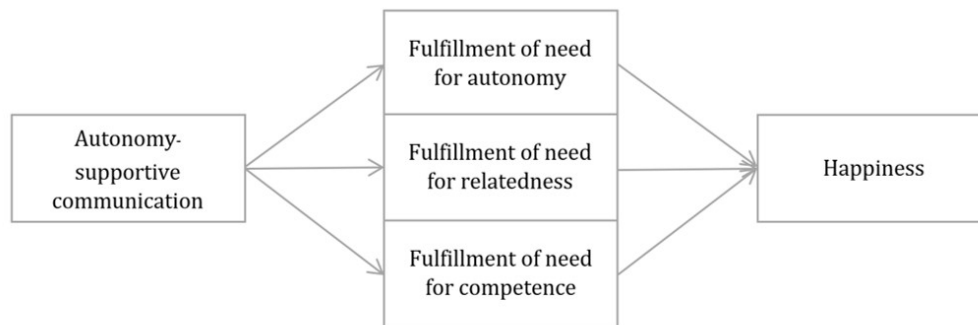


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The current study primarily examined the role of autonomy-supportive communication among the Thai aging population. Based on the sample-to-ratio, a minimum observation-to-variable ratio of 20:1 is preferred (Hair et al., 2018). Therefore, the hypothesized model with one independent variable and three mediators would require at least 80 participants. In this research, 110 Thai citizens aged between 60–75 years old were recruited (37 males and 73 females, average age = 65.1). Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing policy in Thailand, all participants were required to have internet access, as the survey would be conducted online using convenience sampling and the snowball technique.

2.2 Research design and procedure

A cross-sectional and correlational design was used to test the influence of autonomy-supportive communication on happiness via fulfillment of basic psychological needs. The predictor was autonomy-supportive communication, the mediators were fulfillment of the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, and the dependent variable was happiness.

The present study received ethical clearance (COA No. 065.2/64) through the Research Ethics Committee at Chulalongkorn University. Using convenience sampling, those who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to complete the surveys online via SurveyMonkey. All participants provided informed consent before taking part in this study and were debriefed at the end of the survey.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Autonomy-supportive communication. The autonomy-supportive communication scale was a five-point rating scale developed from an exploratory study on “happy words” among 20 Thai senior citizens residing in the Chang Wattana and Wang Tong Lang areas in Bangkok. The scales contained 22 items along five dimensions: 1) love words ($\alpha = 0.884$), 2) caring words ($\alpha = 0.859$), 3) supportive words ($\alpha = 0.837$), 4) autonomy words ($\alpha = 0.763$), and 5) competent words ($\alpha = 0.877$). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they had heard their family members use these words to communicate with them (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *always*).

2.3.2 Fulfillment of psychological needs. Adapted from the Basic Psychological Needs in Exercise Scale (BPNES) by Vlachopoulos et al. (2010), the fulfillment of psychological needs scale was a five-point rating scale. The scale contained 11 items consisting of four items measuring fulfillment of need for autonomy ($\alpha = 0.898$), four items measuring fulfillment of need for competence ($\alpha = 0.874$), and three items measuring fulfillment of need for relatedness ($\alpha = 0.874$). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which each statement could represent them (from 1 = *not like me at all* to 5 = *just like me*).

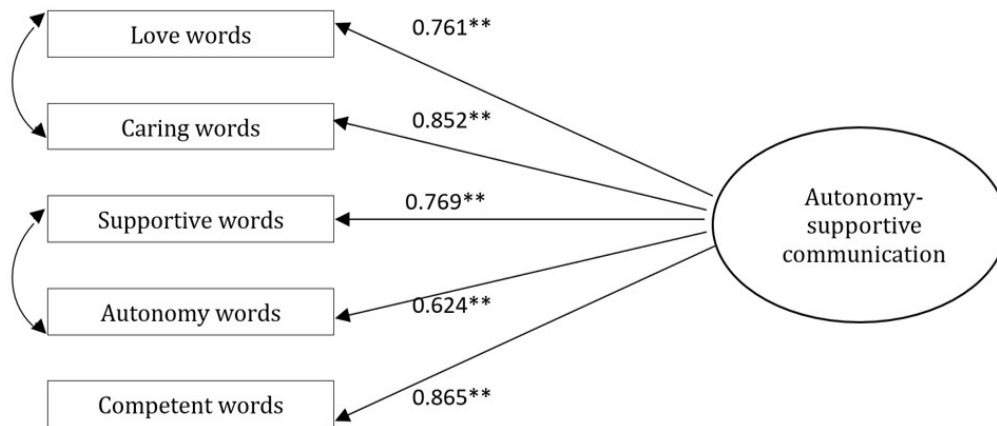
2.3.3 Happiness. Using the Thai version of the life satisfaction scale by Isaranon (2019), which was adapted from Diener et al. (1985, p. 72), participants were asked to rate the extent to which each statement

could represent them (from 1 = *not like me at all* to 5 = *just like me*). The scale was a five-point rating scale containing five items ($\alpha = 0.894$).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Testing measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the construct validity of autonomy-supportive communication. Based on 110 observations, the results showed the model fit with the data, i.e., the measurement model was consistent with the empirical data ($\chi^2 = 2.31$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.510$, RMSEA = 0.00), as shown in Figure 2.



$$\chi^2 = 2.31, df = 3, p = 0.510, CFI = 1, RMSEA = 0.00$$

Figure 2: Measurement Model of Autonomy-supportive Communication Among Thai Elderly Individuals

3.2 Descriptive statistics

The means and standard deviations of the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlations of the Study Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
(1) Autonomy-supportive communication	(0.947)	0.423***	0.519***	0.391***	0.430***	3.20	0.83
(2) Fulfillment of need for autonomy		(0.898)	0.598***	0.415***	0.491***	4.04	0.77
(3) Fulfillment of need for competence			(0.874)	0.475***	0.705***	3.87	0.71
(4) Fulfillment of need for relatedness				(0.874)	0.508***	4.30	0.72
(5) Happiness					(0.894)	3.82	0.71

Note. Numbers on the diagonals are Cronbach's alpha. *** $p < .001$

3.3 Hypothesis testing

Multiple regression analysis and PROCESS Model 4 were used to test the research hypotheses. The results showed that autonomy-supportive communication had direct and positive effects on fulfillment of the need for autonomy ($\beta = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$), competence ($\beta = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$), and relatedness ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$). However, autonomy-supportive communication had no direct effect on happiness ($\beta = 0.039$, ns). In addition, fulfillment of the need for competence ($\beta = 0.552$, $p < 0.001$) and relatedness ($\beta = .206$, $p < .001$) had positive effects on happiness. However, there was no effect of fulfillment of need for autonomy ($\beta = 0.038$, ns).

The results also showed that fulfillment of the need for competence ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$) and relatedness ($\beta = 0.024$, $p < 0.001$) had mediating effects on the relationship between autonomy-supportive communication and happiness. Overall, autonomy-supportive communication had a positive and indirect effect on happiness through fulfillment of the need for competence and relatedness ($\beta = 0.430$, $p < 0.05$, $R^2 = 53.9$), suggesting that the relationship between autonomy-supportive communication and happiness was fully

mediated by fulfillment of the need for competence and relatedness. No mediating effect of fulfillment of need for autonomy was found, as shown in Figure 3.

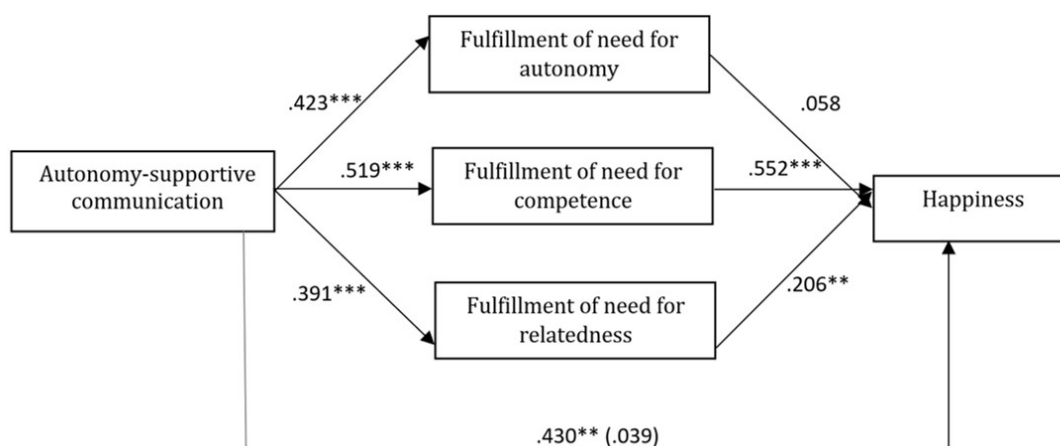


Figure 3: Hypothesis Testing

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the standardized regression of the direct effect of autonomy-supportive communication when all mediators were entered into the model. *** $p < 0.001$.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study examined the influence of autonomy-supportive communication on happiness via fulfillment of psychological needs among the Thai aging population. In support of the research hypotheses, the results showed that autonomy-supportive communication from other family members could enhance happiness among elderly individuals. Additionally, this positive effect was mediated by fulfillment of the need for competence and relatedness. Findings from this study could contribute to the development of effective message guidelines for communicating with senior citizens.

The results from this research, which found the positive influence of autonomy-supportive communication on happiness, suggest that receiving positive words, including words from family members that reflect love, caring, support, autonomy, and admiration in relation to the elderly's competence, could boost happiness among senior citizens. This is consistent with previous research that found that receiving positive messages or words from significant others could elevate self-esteem and happiness in its recipients (Mukherjee, 2017), especially when age differences played a role in the context of the communication (Hummert et al., 1998). This study provides empirical evidence that older family members could maintain or uplift their happiness when other family members consistently treat them with respect through supportive words.

Moreover, the results from this study also revealed that the positive influence of autonomy-communication on happiness was fully mediated by fulfillment of the need for relatedness and competence. In other words, fulfillment of the need for relatedness and competence through communication was found to be a key mechanism for happiness among older people. This is in line with self-determination theory, which proposes that the fulfillment of psychological needs is a fundamental part of individuals' well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In addition, the results are consistent with previous research on happiness among the aging population (Annopkraisorn & Isaranon, 2020; Kasser & Ryan, 1999; Patrick et al., 2007; Souesme et al., 2016), i.e., upon receiving autonomy-supportive words, the elderly feel that they have a positive relationship within their family. This may also imply that family members or caregivers with positive interactions are willing to provide care for them (Prapaipanich & Tangtammaruk, 2021). Furthermore, certain words could affirm their sense of competence that they are a capable family member, which would support self-respect and happiness.

It is important to note that fulfillment of the need for autonomy did not play a role as a mediator in the hypothesized model. In detail, it did not influence happiness. This suggests that fulfillment of the need for autonomy, though found to be positively correlated with happiness, did not have a unique variance in predicting happiness. This could be because the effect of fulfilling such needs may overlap with fulfilling other need. Moreover, it could be that senior citizens in Thailand may not recognize freedom in decision-making as beneficial to their lives. Additionally, they may not have self-efficacy in making decisions on their own. Thus, in their view, having other family members decide on their behalf may be more effective (Strough et al., 2015).

In general, the present study largely supported hypotheses that autonomy-supportive communication could enhance the happiness of the aging population by fulfilling their psychological needs. However, it should be noted that the hypothesized model could only explain 53.9% of variation in happiness. This suggests that despite supportive words from family members, and fulfilling needs for relatedness and competence, other factors may influence elderly people's happiness. These other factors may include participating in leisure or social activities (Annopkraisorn & Isaranon, 2020) or engaging in prosocial behavior for personal growth (Orenstein & Lewis, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The present study provides empirical evidence that autonomy-supportive words could enhance happiness among the Thai aging population. In particular, the fulfillment of the need for relatedness and competence were found to be key mechanisms underlying such a positive influence.

The findings from the present study provide additional empirical evidence that highlights the role of effective communication among the aging population. Autonomy-supportive communication that affirms love, caring, support, autonomy, and competence of older adults could significantly increase their happiness. Thus, organizations that are responsible for the aging population's well-being could utilize these results for designing materials or campaigns that encourage communicating to the elderly with autonomy-supportive words. Positive and supportive words that reflect not only caring (e.g., "Please take good care of yourself") but also admiration (e.g., "You are always excellent") toward the elderly in their competence could be promoted as a list of phrases for consistently communicating with older adults, especially among those living in multigenerational households, as another strategy for improving the quality of life of senior citizens.

Although this study could fill a research gap and provide empirical practice for enhancing happiness for elderly individuals, there are a few limitations that should be considered. First, this study was conducted using an online survey with 110 Thai participants. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to all Thai senior citizens. Future research should replicate the study using other techniques (e.g., interviews) and recruit more participants to test whether the same results would occur. Moreover, more diverse samples should be collected to compare and investigate whether there would be differences across areas. For example, a sample in future research may include both Thai and non-Thai citizens to examine whether the role of autonomy-supportive communication is universal.

Last, this study adopted a cross-sectional and correlational research design to test the positive influence of autonomy-supportive communication. Thus, it may be important to use other research designs (e.g., longitudinal study, experimental design) to test whether such a positive effect could influence happiness in the long run.

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