Motivation, Theories of

A general assumption of motivational theory is that individuals avoid tasks or activities that exceed their abilities and competencies. The literature reports conflicts and shortfalls associated with different perspectives theories that attempt to describe the assumption. Debates exist about the extent to which mastery goals versus performance goals motivate individuals and the use of rewards to reinforce behaviors. The differences have led to the promotion of self-choice, self-determination, and instructional applications aimed to increase motivation.

One perspective of motivation aligned with early behaviorist traditions suggested that motivation could not exist. They positioned behaviors as sole results of past experiences and conflicted with a present-future paradigm of motivation. A second perspective includes the theory of planned behavior that links motivation with intentions. A third perspective relates to the selective goal hypothesis, which proposed that individuals enhance their motivation when they choose goals relevant to their present situations. A fourth perspective, organismic worldview, asserts that the onset of motivation occurs when individuals'sensory organs respond to stimuli that require reactions. A fifth perspective, sociocultural engagement, suggests that individuals must alter their motivation in accord with social practices.

Research reported in the literature cannot be used to rule in or rule out certain perspectives of motivation. Gaps exist and result from faults associated with research designs and subject selections. Critics of motivational research doubted uses of particular perspectives theories that may have overlooked essential variables. They questioned whether researchers imposed goals that required subjects' motivation or observed subjects' self-initiated goals and related motivation. Furthermore, they questioned researchers' control for variance among subjects and accounted for experiences outside the research setting that may have influenced subjects' motivation (e.g., teacher-student interactions). The accumulated lack of universal acceptance of research designs fueled arguments about published motivational studies in the 1990s for which the educational research community debated the acceptance of meta-analyses results. At present, greater research attention focuses on subjects' broader contexts that may influence motivational behaviors. Specifically, it addresses individuals' orientations toward performance goals, mastery goals, or a combination of both goal types.

Individuals in pursuit of performance goals attempt to outperform their peers (e.g., "My goal is to sell more houses than any other real estate agent in the firm"). An individual's motivation is dependent on feedback from others. Common characteristics include (a) dependence on public recognition, (b) negative effects post failure, (c) overuse of short-term strategies (e.g., memorization), and (d) avoidance of challenging tasks. In contrast, individuals in pursuit of mastery goals attempt to acquire knowledge and skills for their personal betterment (e.g., "My goal in working at this firm is to learn as much as possible about successful real estate sales"). An individual's motivation is devoid of dependence on others and is selfregulated. Extensive positive characteristics include (a) increased task engagement, (b) adaptive patterns of achievement, (c) global perceptions of the self, (d) pursuit of and persistence with challenging tasks, (e) universal strategies, (f) pride and satisfaction, and (g) self-monitoring. Individuals' simultaneous pursuit of both performance and mastery goals suggest that motivation for certain tasks requires both goals, referred to as a multiple goal perspective.

Options to make personal choices must be present for individuals to formulate performance, mastery, or combined goals relative to their required (e.g., job performance) or desired (e.g., skills acquisition)

performances. Research links autonomy with increased intrinsic motivation and the ability to infuse cultural practices with goal decisions. The combination of choice options with volition (the degree to which choices can be made versus imposed) and internal locus of control (the degree to which choices can be self-regulated) equate with the theory of self-determination.

Teachers' expectations and beliefs are variables that influence students' choices of goals. Furthermore, teachers may employ instructional and interaction strategies that increase a particular type of goal. Teachers' recognitions of students' performances give implicit and explicit notions of valued performances and are most evident in evaluations. For example, teachers' use of frequent grades, public evaluations, and social comparisons result in students' choices of performance goals. Teachers' uses of rewards influence students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and thus elicit either performance or mastery goals. The literature details arguments for and against rewards.

Proponents of rewards acknowledge that educators need to follow up with explanations for reward distributions, especially verbal rewards that include positive feedback. They posit that doing so increases students' performances. Antagonists argue that rewards undermine internal motivation, especially for individuals who do not need them in order to engage in tasks. They assert that rewards (a) control, not empower motivation, (b) require submission to imposed standards, and (c) limit goals' capabilities.

Implications for teachers' use of instructional strategies and rewards to improve students'motivation appear in the literature. Overall, academic tasks impact motivation the most and should differ among students and empower personal choices relative to mastery goals. Teachers should help students establish attainable mastery goals and point out how effort toward the goals results in fruition. Throughout the tasks, teachers should avoid and replace physical rewards with ongoing feedback and opportunities to improve performances. Evaluations should occur in private to avoid students' total focus on performance goals. Teachers should also help students establish positive performance goals and structure social interactions (e.g., cooperative learning) that allow students to give and receive constructive feedback throughout the groups' performances.

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Further Readings and References

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