Expectancy Value Motivational Theory

Author: Jacquelynne Eccles
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ASKING "CAN I DO THE TASK?"

ASKING "DO I WANT TO DO THE TASK?"

Between 1980 and the early 2000s, Jacquelynne Eccles and colleagues studied the motivational and social factors influencing such long and short-range school-related goals and behaviors as school grades, course selections, and high school graduation. They elaborated a comprehensive theoretical model linking achievement-related choices to two sets of beliefs: the individual's expectations for success and the importance or value the individual attaches to the various options perceived by the individual as available (see Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). In this model, they also specified the relation of these beliefs to cultural norms, experiences, aptitudes, and to those personal beliefs and attitudes that are commonly assumed to be associated with achievement-related activities (Eccles et al., 1998). In particular, they linked achievement-related beliefs, outcomes, and goals to interpretative systems such as causal attributions and other meaning-making beliefs linked to achievement-related activities and events, to the input of parents, peers, and teachers, to various social roles and other culturally based beliefs about both the nature of various tasks in a variety of achievement domains and the appropriateness of participation in such tasks, to self-perceptions and self-concepts, to perceptions of the task itself, and to the processes and consequences associated with identity formation.

For example, regarding engagement in school learning, they believe people will be most likely to engage fully in school-based learning activities if they have confidence in their ability to do well and place high value on doing well in school. High confidence in one's academic potential results from a history of doing well in school, as well from strong messages that one is academically competent from one's parents, teachers, and peers (Wigfield et al., 2006). Similarly, the personal value one attaches to learning in school is influenced by several factors: Does the person enjoy doing the subject material? Is the learning activity seen as instrumental in meeting one of the individual's long- or short-range goals? Is the person anxious about his or her ability to successfully master the learning material being presented? Does the person think that the learning task is appropriate for people like him or her? Do the person's parents and teachers think doing well in school is important and have they provided advice on the utility value of school success for various future life options? Finally, does taking the working on the learning task interfere with other more valued options?

At the most basic psychological level, the Eccles and colleagues expectancy-value model reduces to two fundamental motivational questions: "Can I do the task?" and "Do I want to do the task?" If students answer no to the question "Can I do the task?" then they are unlikely to fully engage in the learning opportunities provided in school. But even if the answer to the first question is yes, full and sustained engagement in school learning depends on the answer to the question, "Do I want to do the task?" If the answer to this question is no, then it is also unlikely that the students will engage the learning opportunities at school.

ASKING "CAN I DO THE TASK?"

Research supports the hypothesis that a yes answer to the question, "Can I do the task?" predicts better performance and more motivation to select more challenging tasks (Wigfield et al., 2006). Importantly, confidence in one's ability to master academic work is a strong predictor of school achievement among

academically struggling students (NRC, 2004). Unfortunately, negative racial, ethnic, gender, and social class stereotypes can lead teachers and school districts to communicate low expectations for the academic achievements of some groups of students through a variety of mechanisms, including differential teacher-student face-to-face daily interactions, tracking into low ability groups coupled with providing inferior educational experiences in these groups, failure to provide encouragement for high educational aspirations, and failure to provide high quality educational experiences that promote both current achievement levels and confidence and lay the groundwork for continued success in future courses (see Eccles, 2007).

ASKING "DO I WANT TO DO THE TASK?"

Fully engaging learning at school requires a desire to do the task (Wigfield et al. 2006). Eccles and colleagues argue that the perceived value of school work is determined by four related constructs: (1) the enjoyment one expects to experience while engaging in the task—intrinsic interest; (2) the extent to which engaging in the task is consistent with one's self-image or identity—attainment value; (3) the value of the task for facilitating one's long range goals or in helping one obtain immediate or long range external rewards —utility value; and (4) the perceived cost of engaging in the activity.

Intrinsic Value. Eccles and colleagues use the term intrinsic value to refer to either the enjoyment one feels when doing the task or the enjoyment one expects to experience while one is engaged in the task. This construct is most closely related to two related constructs: the idea of intrinsic motivation as developed by E. Deci and R. Ryan and the idea of interest as developed by theorists such as A. Krapp, A. Renniger, and U. Schefiele. According to Deci and Ryan, intrinsic motivation is highest when individuals are doing tasks that they enjoy, as well as when they are doing tasks that are personally meaningful (somewhat like attainment value). Interest theorists argue that engagement will be highest when individuals are doing interesting tasks. According to these theorists, interest value results from either inherent characteristics of the task (called situational interest) or personal characteristics of the individuals doing the task (called personal interest). Individual interest is considered a relatively stable evaluative orientation towards certain domains that one enjoys; situational interest is an emotional state aroused by specific features of an activity or a task. Evidence is quite strong that interests, intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic value predict greater academic engagement and learning (see Eccles et al., 1998; Wigfield et al., 2006).

Some educational psychologists are interested in individual differences in trait-like individual differences in what might be referred to as the desire to learn (e.g., Gottfried, Harter, Hidi, and Schiefele). These researchers define this enduring learning orientation in terms of three components: (1) preference for hard or challenging tasks, (2) learning that is driven by curiosity or interest, and (3) striving for competence and mastery. Empirical findings suggest that the three components are highly correlated and that high levels of a trait-like desire to learn is related to a mastery-oriented coping style for dealing with academic failure, high academic achievement, both comprehension and deep-level learning, and the use of appropriate self-regulated learning strategies in academic tasks (see Wigfield et al., 2006). Some scholars believe the component of interest should be considered as an influence on attainment value.

Situational learning is more transitory because it is based in the nature of the academic curriculum and materials themselves. The following task features arouse situational interest: personal relevance, both familiarity and novelty, high activity level, and comprehensibility (see Wigfield et al., 2006). These characteristics facilitate both engagement and learning. We classify this construct under intrinsic value.

Attainment and Utility Value. Eccles and colleagues use the term *attainment value* to refer to the link between tasks and individuals' own identities and preferences. As they grow up, individuals develop an image of who they are and what they would like to be. This image is made up of many parts, including (1) conceptions of one's personality and capabilities, (2) long range goals and plans, (3) schema regarding the proper roles of men and women in one's culture group, (4) instrumental and terminal values, (5) motivational sets, (6) ideal images of what one should be like; (7) stable personal interests, and (8) social scripts regarding proper behavior in a variety of situations. Eccles and colleagues conceptualize attainment value in terms of these needs, personal interests, and personal values that an activity fulfills. Those parts of an individual's self-image that are central or critical to self-definition should influence the value the

individual attaches to various activities such as school-based learning activities versus other activities. These differential values, in turn, should influence the individual's desire to engage fully in school-based learning activities. For example, if doing well in school and being a good student is a central part of an individual's self-image, then that person should place higher value on investing time and energy in doing well in school than in other pursuits because doing well in school has high attainment value for this individual.

Utility value is determined by how well a task fits into an individual's goals and plans or fulfills other basic psychological needs. For example, if students plan to become engineers then mastering arithmetic in elementary school and doing well in challenging mathematics and science courses in secondary school will have high utility value because it will allow them to take college track mathematics in secondary school and then get into college training programs in engineering. If not, then the value of doing the work necessary to succeed in these courses may be too low to motivate their effort.

Regarding what might influence the attainment value and utility of doing well and being engaged in school, J. Connell and colleagues proposed three basic human needs that should influence the attainment value of any task or situation: the needs for competence, relat-edness, and autonomy. They argue that people's motivation to engage in the demands of any particular situation or setting is influenced by the extent to which the setting provides opportunities to experience autonomy, social relatedness, and a sense of competence. If schools and classrooms do not provide these opportunities, then individuals will not become engaged in school learning and will try to disengage by whatever means are available to them. In contrast, if classroom experiences provide opportunities for students to fulfill these basic needs, then the attainment value of fully engaging in the learning agenda of school should be increased.

The importance of competence needs, in particular, has received a great deal of attention in the achievement literature. This research has shown that early school failure predicts disengagement from school (Eccles et al., 1998; Wigfield et al., 2006). Given this evidence, it is essential that teachers set up their instructional practices in ways that allow all children to experience success at their mastery attempts, particularly at critical school transitions when academic failure may precipitate a downward spiral of disengagement leading to school drop out. Researchers in the area of achievement goal theory (e.g., Maehr & Midgley) have explored the importance of mastery-oriented classrooms. These researchers hypothesize that school learning tasks vary along at least two important dimensions: (1) the extent to which mastery or improvement is stressed (i.e., a mastery focus); and (2) the extent to which doing better than others is stressed (i.e., a performance focus). They argue that the greater the focus on mastery instead of performance, the greater the likelihood that all students will feel competent and will have repeated experiences of mastery. Their research supports this hypothesis.

Evidence also supports the importance for school engagement. For example, several researchers (e.g., Goodenow, Patrich, Roeser, Ryan, & Wentzel), have shown that feelings of belongingness in classrooms and schools, as well as a sense of being part of a supportive learning community, predict increased engagement and school learning. In addition, one of the major benefits of both cooperative learning structures and Catholic schools is that they increase all students' sense of belonging in their classroom's and school's agenda (see Eccles, 2007).

In contrast, experiences of racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and gender discrimination are likely to undermine minority and female students' sense of belonging at school. For example, C. Wong and her colleagues showed that experiences of racial discrimination predicted declines in school achievement. Similarly, C. Steele and his colleagues argue that students who believe that their teachers have low expectations for their academic performance will disidentify with school learning as a way of coping with experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination at school (see Eccles, 2007).

Deci, Ryan, and their colleagues have done most of the work on the importance of support for autonomy in classrooms for students' motivation to fully engage the learning agenda of the classroom. They argue that individuals need to feel personally responsible for their behavior and their goals. To the extent that teachers create opportunities for this to be the case, students are more motivated to do their school work and learn the material better.

Eccles and colleagues believe that people need to feel that they are considered valuable contributors to their social groups and institutions. This need is likely to become especially salient during adolescence. One intervention study was done based on this need: the Coca Cola study (see Eccles, 2007). In this project, at-risk adolescents were asked to provide cross-age peer tutoring in reading to first graders. Those adolescents who had this experience over an extended period of time showed an increased commitment to their own academic performance as evidenced by increases in their grades and high school graduation rates.

Individual differences in school motivation are also likely to be linked to individual differences in self-schema and both personal and social goals and identities. As noted above, these differences should be directly related to the perceived attainment value of various activities. The work of Eccles and colleagues on gender differences in high school math and science course enrollment illustrates the importance of the perceived utility value of various course options. Using longitudinal methods, they demonstrated that gender differences in students' decisions to enroll in advanced mathematics are mediated primarily by gender differences in the value that the students' attached to mathematics. More specifically, their findings indicate that young women are less likely than the young men to enroll in advanced high school mathematics and physics courses primarily because they feel that math and physical science are less important, less useful, and less enjoyable than do young men. Furthermore, young women tend to think that advanced math and physics are less important and enjoyable than the many other advanced high school courses they could be taking instead. Interestingly, interventions based on making physics more interesting to females by using more human biological examples of physical principles have been quite successful at increasing females' engagement in physics classes.

Perceived Cost. The value of a task also depends on a set of beliefs that can best be characterized as the cost of participating in the activity. Cost is influenced by many factors, such as anticipated anxiety, fear of failure, fear of the social consequences of success, such as rejection by peers or anticipated racial discrimination, or anger from one's parents or other key people, and fear of loss of a sense of self-worth.

This conceptualization of cost is similar to the kinds of dynamics discussed by M. Covington in his self-worth theory. Covington defined the motive for self-worth as the desire to establish and maintain a positive self-image or sense of self-worth. Because children spend so much time in classrooms and are evaluated so frequently there, Covington argued that protecting one's sense of academic competence is likely to be critical for maintaining a positive sense of self-worth. However, school evaluation, competition, and social comparison can make it difficult for some children to maintain the belief that they are competent academically. Covington outlined various strategies children develop to avoid appearing to lack ability, including procrastination, making excuses, avoiding challenging tasks, and not trying. Therefore, if failure seems likely, some children will not try, precisely because trying and failing threatens their ability self-concepts.

Avoiding challenging tasks is a good way to avoid or minimize failure experiences. Similarly, work by R. Newman and his colleagues demonstrated that students may be reluctant to ask for help in classrooms because they think that this will make them appear to be stupid.

Cost can also be conceptualized in terms of the loss of time and energy for other activities. People have limited time and energy. They cannot do everything they would like. They must choose among activities. Eccles and colleagues asserted that cost is especially important to choice and that socio-cultural processes linked to social identity formation and cultural socialization should have a big influence of the perceived cost of the various activities competing for young people's time and energy. Schools need to provide young people with genuine reasons for attaching higher subjective task value to engaging in school work than in engaging in the variety of tasks associated with other aspects on their daily lives.

As noted above, the expectancy-value model focuses attention on two fundamental motivational questions: “Can I do the task?” and “Do I want to do the task?” The first question illustrates the expectancy component. If students answer no to this question, then they will be unlikely to fully engage in the learning opportunities provided in school. But even if the answer to this question is yes, full and sustained engagement in school learning depends on the answer to the question “Do I want to do the task?” This question illustrates the value component of the model. If the answer to this question is no, then it is also

unlikely that the students will engage the learning opportunities at school. It is critical that school environments provide students will the kinds of experiences that will allow them to answer yes to both of these questions.

See also:Eccles, Jacquelynne S. 1944-, Goal Orientation Theory, School Belonging, Teacher Expectations

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