Book review

Student Motivation: The Culture and Context of Learning
Farideh Salili, Chi Yue Chiu and Ying Yi Hong (Eds)
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When thinking about human exceptionality, many of us conjure up images of gifted individuals, whose natural gifts allow them to excel at a given craft. Alternatively, we may think of individuals born with a particular learning or developmental disability and whose special needs require special attention. At the core of both of these conceptualizations is a view of exceptionality as an inborn, stable and unchangeable human characteristic. *Student motivation: The culture and context of learning*, the third volume within the Plenum Series on Human Exceptionality, takes a different and often overlooked view of exceptionality. From the cultural and social forces that constrain its social construction to the motivational and environmental forces that can enhance or impede the fulfillment of a person's potential, this volume emphasizes how human exceptionality is as much bred as it is born.

Over the past 15 years, research and theory in personality, social and cultural psychology have increasingly recognized the importance of interactions between personal dispositions and contextual or situational factors (e.g. Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and the co-constitution of person and culture (e.g. Stigler *et al.*, 1990) in understanding behavior. In line with this growing body of work, this volume brings together a series of chapters that consider cultural and contextual factors affecting motivation and learning. A principal strength of the volume – and a key to its success in highlighting the influence of culture and context – lies in the editors' choice of contributors. Scholars from universities in China, Germany, Australia, the United States, and the Netherlands each offer a unique perspective on central issues surrounding student motivation.

Following an introductory chapter by the editors, 15 chapters are subdivided into three broadly defined sections. In the first two sections, two major motivational theories – attribution theory and goal orientation theory – are applied to topics such as devaluation of learning, maladaptive reactions to failure, and rejection of academic challenges. The third section deals with classroom instruction – the main context in which academic goals are developed, pursued, and attained. Although we mostly remain faithful to this organization, the interconnections between the three sections are rich, and we highlight some of the most interesting among these.

Attributions in context – intrapersonal consequences, interpersonal uses

The section on attribution theory opens with a chapter by Bernard Weiner, who reminds us that, insofar as attributions "fill the gap between the stimulus . . . and the response" (p. 18), they are key to understanding the effect that past (and current) academic experiences have on behavioral reactions and on expectancies for future experiences. Within the framework of

attribution theory, Weiner distinguishes between two overlapping yet distinct theories of motivation: an intrapersonal theory, in which self-directed emotions such as self-esteem and self-evaluative judgements are the focus, and an interpersonal theory, in which others' judgements and evaluations play a key motivational role. This distinction resonates throughout the volume. Weiner points out that evaluation is a moral value judgement, and, as such, is necessarily intertwined with the system of dominant beliefs in the culture.

The effects of cultural norms on attributions are explored further by Sandra Graham, who discusses how students of different ethnicities within the USA differentially infer responsibility for and attach value to others' academic outcomes. Graham finds that academic achievement is devalued by African-American adolescent, but not younger, males. Jaana Juvonen contributes a conceptualization of attributions not as private explanations, but rather as tools to manage a public image. She notes that students by fourth grade are able to manage their accounts for success and failure according to their beliefs concerning the social benefits of particular attributions. Taken together, Juvonen and Graham's findings suggest that African-American boys may use face-saving tactics, such as exerting little effort on schoolwork, to maintain their social relationships. These strategic missteps can be encouraged by competitive methods of evaluation.

Colette van Laar describes the phenomenon of waning optimism throughout the course of college among minority students within the USA Minority students progressively come to attribute their comparatively lower academic outcomes to external causes, such as prejudice and discrimination, while attributing successes to internal factors. Self-esteem is in this way buffered, but these students' expectancies for the future become bleaker as they progress through college.

A chapter by Ying-Yi Hong provides cultural counterpoint to the chapters by Graham, Juvonen, and van Laar. Hong points out that Western theories of achievement (both lay and scientific) have tended to conceptualize beliefs about ability and effort as end-points within a single continuum, linked by a 'negative rule' such that a strong attribution to one implies a weak attribution to the other. Hong proposes and finds evidence for a coexisting belief in Chinese culture for a 'positive rule', where one's abilities blossom only under great effort and where hard-working people are perceived to have superior ability. Within this framework, Hong tackles paradoxical findings that Chinese students are more successful than their Western counterparts, yet can also be more vulnerable to intrapersonal motivational difficulties such as self-doubt and anxiety. Hong's article is a clear example of how learning and motivation across different parts of the world cannot necessarily be understood within the same (Western) framework, underscoring the need for the cultural boundedness of theory and research within educational psychology.

Cultural influences on goal formation and attainment

The second section of *Student Motivation* discusses goal orientation theory. The two central types of goals denoted by goal orientation theory (although called by many names) are performance and task learning. The former are goals concerned with providing evidence for having attained a particular level of performance. The latter are goals relating to mastering the task, and to learning a pursuit unto itself. By and large, task goals have been associated with more positive achievement, affective, and self-regulation outcomes. The relations of goal orientation to cultural diversity, self-regulated learning, goal structures, and attributions for failure are examined. A central point of this section, alluded to also in Section 1, is that students' goals are formulated not in a vacuum, but within the context of the classroom and

culture. The basic tenets of this theory seem to be applicable in Eastern as well as in Western cultures. However, these two goal orientations, as Kan Shi and colleagues point out, are embedded in an individualistic conceptual framework and may have less explanatory power in collectivist cultures. Their chapter gives further evidence for the increasing emphasis on performance with age, and shows a divergence between cultures in that a performance-orientation has a positive effect on self-efficacy among Chinese but not American students. This issue is further developed by Heidi Grant and Carol Dweck, who deal with the motivational patterns of Asian students as compared to US students. Grant and Dweck note that failure to attain academic goals can be qualitatively different for students in different cultures, perceived as a reflection on you (in Western societies) or on you plus everyone surrounding you (in Eastern societies). These authors additionally look at the dimension of individual versus group outcomes (again raising the responsibility theme): 'If the outcome has repercussions for others as well as the self . . . then even an effort-oriented individual can no longer avoid focusing on the importance of a single outcome' (p. 210).

Simone Volet in Section 3 investigates a related question – students' attitudes towards group work. If collectivist, interdependent, Eastern cultures place greater emphasis on group goals than on individual goals, then perhaps students' goal structures depend on whether task outcomes will affect more than one person. Indeed, high levels of interdependence are shown to relate to higher ratings of group work, although with some interesting cultural interactions. Farideh Salili, Chi Yue Chiu, and Simon Lai describe a large-scale cross-cultural study containing many interesting findings, the most striking of which (as noted by Hong in Section 1) is a sizeable negative correlation among Hong Kong Chinese students between studying time and examination results (this correlation was positive for European Canadian and Chinese Canadian students). The pressures of Hong Kong schools, and the frustration of not seeing one's efforts pay off, may create an environment where 'many less able students and students with special needs are unable to thrive in Hong Kong schools and eventually drop out' (p. 226). This problem warrants further elaboration, as it calls into question intercultural comparisons of US and Hong Kong students. If, for example, the proportion of dropouts becomes different in Hong Kong than in the USA at a certain point during schooling, then we may be dealing with differently selected populations.

The discussion of diversity offered by Maehr and Yamaguchi relates school culture to students' goals and the development of intervention programs within that culture. A classroom culture in which all students are motivated must be created by 'the school context, practices, and policies that define and express the meaning of schooling' (p. 127). Although one might think that this task is specifically relevant in multicultural settings, where diverse meaning systems must be taken into account, Tim Urdan points out that difficulties associated with defining and communicating goals commonly occur even among teachers and students of the same culture. The scant overlap delineated by Urdan of teachers' and students' perceptions of educational goals (the purposes behind engaging in various academic tasks) is striking, given that – as many of these authors convincingly argue – so much rides on students' goal orientations and attributions. Paul Pintrich and colleagues remind us that the issue is even more complicated: students have multiple goals activated by any given task, and there are multiple pathways to academic achievement.

Networks of meaning

The final section of *Student Motivation* opens the horizon of motivational research from single- or dual-variable considerations into analyses of learning within interconnected

networks of meaning. With an explicit focus on the context of learning and classroom instruction, this section directly addresses issues of interest to applied researchers and educators. Although this section offers few guidelines for solutions to the challenges facing multicultural classrooms (indeed, chapters by Andreas Helmke and Deborah Stipek elaborate the dearth of available guidelines) the authors here offer refreshing, integrative viewpoints that provide balance to the whole collection. We leave the happy reader to explore this section without a foreshadowing of contents.

Collectively, the 16 chapters in *Student Motivation* illustrate how the norms and practices of the classroom come from the culture that surrounds them, and mold students' motivation. The developmental trend of going from a task-goal orientation to a performance-goal orientation is mentioned in more than one chapter. This is alarming, but understandable given the relatively greater emphasis on standardized testing in later grades, when decisions as to future schooling must be made on the basis of performance. The achievement context – evaluation method, testing method, classroom climate, cultural norms – influences children so that they assume the goals transmitted by their teachers, school policies, parents, and society. This timely collection contributes much-needed research and empiric data in support of recent calls for analyses of learning and education that take multiple levels of context into account (e.g. Cole, 1996). Without this deeper perspective, human exceptionality cannot be understood or cultivated with success.

References

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