

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LINKING STUDENTS' SELF-WORTH TO OUTCOMES

Putting effort into schoolwork to feel worthy and proud of oneself or to avoid feeling unworthy and ashamed is a common motivation among school children (Covington, 1998; Nicholls, 1989). Within Self Determination Theory (SDT), the type of motivation that focuses on the maintenance or enhancement of self-worth is termed introjected motivation. SDT assumes that introjected motivation is accompanied by feelings of internal coercion and pressure, and therefore it is hypothesized to be less optimal than more autonomous types of motivation, such as identified motivation, in which actions are guided by an understanding of and identification with the value of one's actions.

Assor, Vansteenkiste, & Kaplan (2009) distinguished between approach and avoidance components of introjected motivation. In introjected avoidance motivation, people try to avoid feelings of low self-worth, shame, or guilt that may arise as a result of the failure to live up to the introjected standards. For instance, a student is displaying introjected avoidance motivation when he or she works hard at school to avoid the feelings of shame that may result from getting poor grades. In introjected approach motivation, people strive to maintain or attain feelings of high self-worth, pride, and social approval by meeting the introjected standards. For instance, an athlete is displaying introjected approach motivation when he or she puts extra effort into training to feel worthy and proud of him- or herself.

Focus on Personal Value of Activities

Students would perform and feel much better if they would focus on the personal value of the activity they engage in rather than on the implications of their engagement in the activity for their self-worth or others' regard for them. For example, students who are top athletes practicing in highly competitive settings are likely to feel that other people's regard, their self-worth, and their identity hinge on their achievements (Assor, Roth & Deci, 2004).

Self-Worth Motivation Creates Uncertainty

Long-term self-worth motivation is likely to undermine well-being because it constantly arouses uncertainty about one's worth. For example, if a teacher constantly says "Good students should complete all their homework", students will feel motivated as long as they are able to complete the task. However, if they encounter difficulties such as the work becoming too hard, or if there's too much of it, then it might arouse negative feelings because these demands would be experienced as threatening (given the possibility of occasional failure) or because they would be perceived as insensitive, unreasonable, or unjust.

Self-Worth as a Basis For Action Creates Pressure

Having high, authentic, and stable self-esteem is associated with various benefits (Kernis, 2003). However, when self-worth becomes a primary motive for action (as in the case of introjected motivations), people tend to hinge their self-esteem on specific outcomes, and this creates feelings of internal pressure and an unstable and fragile sense of self-worth (Assor et al., 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Doing something because one understands its importance and because the action reflects one's self-chosen values can lead to what Deci and Ryan (1995) called "true self-esteem." Encouraging students to engage in an activity to realize their personal values is likely to create a firm and true sense of authenticity, which in turn enhances their sense of self-worth.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Introjected Motivation is a product of a process in which people rigidly adopt external standards of self-worth and social approval without fully identifying with them and is accompanied by feelings of internal coercion and pressure,

Self-Determination Theory is a macro-theory of human motivation concerned with the development and functioning of personality within social contexts. The theory focuses on the degree to which human behaviors are volitional or self-determined - that is, the degree to which people endorse their actions at the highest level of reflection and engage in the actions with a full sense of choice

Self-Esteem: Global self-esteem measures general perceptions of self-worth; “the awareness of good possessed by self” (Campbell, 1984).

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