

CHAPTER 1



Competence and Motivation

Competence as the Core of Achievement Motivation

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Why is this volume not entitled *Handbook of Achievement and Motivation* or *Handbook of Achievement Motivation*? The reason is that we are taking the occasion of this *Handbook* to propose a refocusing of the achievement motivation literature around the concept of “competence.” As we describe below, our aim in doing so is to bring greater clarity and precision to the field, while emphasizing its great reach and potential to integrate important areas of psychology.

Research on achievement and motivation has a long and distinguished history. In fact, achievement motivation concepts were present at the dawn of psychology as a scientific discipline, when James (1890) offered speculation about how achievement strivings are linked to self-evaluation. Soon thereafter, an assortment of research studies appeared that focused on achievement-relevant issues such as the effect of intentions on perseverance (Ach, 1910) and the effect of increasing difficulty on task per-

formance (Hillgruber, 1912). However, truly programmatic empirical work on achievement motivation began in Kurt Lewin’s laboratory with the investigation of aspiration-setting behavior (Hoppe, 1930; see Frank, 1941, for a review of this research program), and formal models of achievement motivation have been present since Lewin and colleagues (Escalona, 1940; Festinger, 1942; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944) proposed their theory of “resultant valence” to account for aspiration processes. A decade later, the central place of research on achievement motivation in scientific psychology was solidified by McClelland, Atkinson, and colleagues’ work on need for achievement (Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; McClelland, Clark, Roby, & Atkinson, 1949). From this time onward, the collective corpus of research on achievement and motivation has been referred to as “the achievement motivation literature.”

An enormous amount of research has followed these seminal speculations, empirical investigations, and theoretical frameworks. Over the years, researchers have devised and tested models incorporating a variety of different constructs, such as motive dispositions, attributions, evaluation anxiety, goals, competence perceptions, values, and implicit theories. These efforts have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the nature of achievement motivation. Importantly, many working in the achievement motivation literature have applied the knowledge acquired from these efforts to real-world achievement settings, and innumerable students, employees, ballplayers, and others have benefited as a result.

Clearly, there is much to praise about the contributions of the achievement motivation literature. However, we believe that the literature has important weaknesses that limit its utility and breadth of influence. In this chapter, we articulate the nature of these weaknesses and propose that placing competence at the core of the achievement motivation literature directly addresses them.

WEAKNESSES OF THE ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION LITERATURE

The concept of "achievement" is not clearly defined in the achievement motivation literature. That is, there is no broadly articulated, consensually shared understanding of how "achievement" should be conceptualized. We believe that this definitional-conceptual issue lies at the root of two fundamental weaknesses of the literature.

A first weakness of the achievement motivation literature is that it lacks coherence and a clear set of structural parameters. If the precise nature of "achievement" is not clear, then the precise nature of what should and should not be included under the "achievement motivation" rubric will be unclear as well. Indeed, although psychologists across a diversity of disciplines recognize the existence of a body of research called "the achievement motivation literature," we suspect that few would be able to articulate the specific contents of this literature. This lack of coherence and clear parameters has negative implications for both empirical efforts and theory development.

On the empirical front, it is difficult to know how constructs should be operationalized without clear conceptual guidance. Any given empirical investigation may provide specific construct definitions and matching operationalizations, but these definitions and operationalizations are likely to vary considerably across investigators and investigations. The result is a cumulative body of studies that may be easy to interpret individually but are difficult to interpret as a whole. Likewise, on the theoretical front, it is difficult to build theoretical models when a solid conceptual foundation is not in place. Without such a foundation, devising a blueprint for how to fully cover the conceptual space under consideration without incorporating additional, superfluous constructs or relationships (i.e., establishing a parsimonious theoretical framework) is near impossible.

A second weakness of the achievement motivation literature is that it is too narrowly focused and limited in scope, particularly relative to its potential. Given the absence of a precise definition of "achievement" in the literature, researchers likely rely on intuition or a generic, lay understanding of the term "achievement" to guide their empirical and theoretical efforts. For example, most research in the achievement motivation literature has emerged from Western, individualistic societies that tend to conceive of achievement in terms of individual, self-defining accomplishment in the prototypical domains of school, sports, and work. As a result, more often than not, research in the achievement motivation literature has focused on individual, self-defining accomplishment in the domains of school, sports, and work.

However, "achievement" and "achievement motivation" may be conceptualized in a much broader fashion than this suggests. Interdependent achievement striving (see Fuligni, 1997; Maehr & Nicholls, 1980), cooperative achievement striving (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Parsons & Goff, 1980), and striving for learning and task mastery (see Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Nicholls, 1984) would all seem to warrant full consideration as manifestations of achievement motivation; only the latter has begun to receive significant attention in the past several years. Furthermore, achievement motivation appears to be operative in many areas of daily

life beyond the classroom, the ballfield, and the workplace. The avocational gardener seeking to grow an excellent tomato would seem to be striving for achievement, as would the infant struggling to put a peg in a hole, the adolescent trying to become a better conversationalist, and the adult committed to becoming the best parent possible. From this broader perspective, the achievement motivation literature seems applicable to many other established research literatures. Issues regarding achievement motivation pertain to research on flow, creativity, cognitive strategies, self-regulated learning, coping and disengagement, and social comparison, to name but a few important domains of inquiry. Yet given the rather narrow way that achievement has been construed, there exists little integration between the achievement motivation literature and these other bodies of work. As such, the achievement motivation literature remains relatively isolated and, we believe, is not being applied to its full potential. The landmark research on need for achievement by McClelland et al. (1953) may be used to illustrate these points.

McClelland, Atkinson, and colleagues created their need for achievement measure empirically, without a precise conceptual definition of achievement motivation to guide their efforts. Briefly, they experimentally aroused achievement motivation in some subjects but not others, and then had these subjects write stories to pictures. Any differential story content between the two groups was presumed to be indicative of achievement motivation, and the need for achievement scoring system was devised accordingly. Importantly, the subjects used in this research were predominantly male ex-GIs, whose achievement motivation was aroused by informing them that they would be administered a test of intelligence used in the selection of government and military leaders. Thus, the method of achievement arousal utilized was based on the researchers' intuitive, culturally based understanding of achievement motivation, and one may question whether these procedures, as well as the type of subjects used in the research, yielded a tool that is broadly applicable across persons and achievement situations. Furthermore, at the same time that the need for achievement construct was being estab-

lished, White (1959, 1960) offered his analysis of effectance motivation. White posited a fundamental need for individuals to be effective in negotiating their environment, the prototypical manifestation of which is the infant's curiosity and exploratory play. Although need for achievement and effectance motivation would seem to be conceptually related, the pioneers of the two constructs made almost no reference to the work of the other, and subsequent proponents of the two traditions have followed suit. To this day, although the need for achievement construct is considered a central part of the achievement motivation literature, effectance motivation is rarely mentioned (for exceptions, see Elliot & Reis, 2003; Nicholls, 1984; Veroff, 1969). The achievement motivation literature (and for that matter, research on effectance motivation) is less rich as a result.

In summary, the absence of a clear definition of "achievement" has led to some important weaknesses in the achievement motivation literature. The literature lacks coherence and a clear set of structural parameters, and the literature is too narrowly focused and limited in scope. In essence, what is commonly referred to as the "achievement motivation literature" represents a rather loose compendium of theoretical and empirical work focused on a colloquial understanding of the term "achievement." We suggest that for the achievement motivation literature to flourish, it is important to delineate its conceptual core carefully and precisely. We seek to do so by proposing that competence be considered the conceptual core of the achievement motivation literature.

COMPETENCE AND MOTIVATION

Based on *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "competence" may be defined as a condition or quality of effectiveness, ability, sufficiency, or success. Once this definition is embraced, many questions come into focus: How is competence evaluated? To what levels of action and domains of endeavor does competence apply? How are individuals motivated with regard to competence?

Competence may be evaluated in several different ways: People may use an absolute

standard inherent in a task, an interpersonal standard implicating change over time, or an interpersonal standard implicating normative comparison. The way in which competence is evaluated influences the psychological meaning that competence has and the form that competence-relevant strivings take in any given situation. Competence is applicable across a broad range of levels, from concrete actions (e.g., putting a peg in a hole) to specific outcomes (e.g., a grade on a test) to identifiable patterns of skill and ability (e.g., piano playing) to overarching characteristics (e.g., intelligence) to omnibus compilations (e.g., a life).

A motivational analysis of competence must account for the ways in which individuals' behavior is energized (instigated, activated) and directed (focused, aimed). Our analysis of the *energization* of competence-relevant behavior is grounded in the premise that competence is an inherent psychological need of the human being. That is, in keeping with several theorists (Deci & Ryan, 1990; Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002; Skinner, 1995; see also White, 1959), we view the need for competence as a fundamental motivation that serves the evolutionary role of helping people develop and adapt to their environment.¹ This need for competence instigates and activates behavior that is oriented toward competence. Over time, individuals learn to *direct* this general motivational energy using concrete, cognitively based goals and strategies; that is, people learn to use self-regulatory tools to channel their general desire for competence toward specific outcomes and experiences that satisfy the competence need (Elliot & Church, 1997, 2002).

Importantly, competence-relevant behavior is not only motivated by the positive, appetitive possibility of competence but is also motivated by the negative, aversive possibility of incompetence. The need for competence may initially be a thoroughly appetitive motivational source that orients infants toward positive competence-relevant possibilities, but a variety of factors (e.g., temperament, socialization, experience) may reorient this natural appetitive orientation toward the avoidance of negative competence-relevant outcomes. Consequently, people may develop a general desire to avoid in-

competence and may adopt goals or strategies focused on avoiding negative possibilities in competence-relevant settings. These aversive forms of motivation may serve a self-protective function, but they may often do a poor job of providing the individual with the positive competence outcomes and experiences required for continued growth and development. As such, some competence-relevant desires and pursuits may be ineffective at facilitating, or may even interfere with, the long-term growth of competence.

We consider this distinction between approach (i.e., appetitive) and avoidance (i.e., aversive) motivation to be integral to a motivational analysis of competence (much as it has been integral to the motivational analysis of achievement per se; see Atkinson, 1957; Elliot, 1999; Hoppe, 1930; Lewin et al., 1944; McClelland et al., 1953; Weiner, 1972). Using a dictionary, "competence" may be defined in purely appetitive fashion with regard to effectiveness, ability, sufficiency, and success, but from a *motivational* standpoint, the study of competence-relevant motivation will necessarily entail consideration of ineffectiveness, inability, insufficiency, and failure as well.

WHY COMPETENCE?

Our primary contention, then, is that "achievement" in the achievement motivation literature is best viewed through the lens of competence. That is, we propose that "achievement" be conceptualized in terms of "competence," and that "achievement motivation" be characterized as "competence motivation." Competence seems an ideal core for the achievement motivation literature, because competence at once has a precise meaning and is a rich and profound psychological concept. This richness and profundity is in bold relief as one considers the central role of competence motivation in human functioning. Competence motivation is ubiquitous in daily life, it has a substantial impact on emotion and well-being, it is operative across the lifespan, and it is evident in all individuals across cultural boundaries. We elaborate on these points in the following paragraphs.

First, competence motivation is ubiquitous in daily life. Whether individuals are conscious of it or not, much of their everyday behavior is energized or directed by the possibility of competence or incompetence. Competence-relevant desires, investments, and strivings are present in mundane actions (e.g., trying to do a good job of brushing one's teeth), as well as more grand pursuits (e.g., trying to become a world-class athlete). They are present in the social domain (e.g., working to improve one's conversational skills), as well as the achievement domain (e.g., striving to do well on an exam). They are present in internally focused pursuits (e.g., seeking discipline and clarity in one's mental life), as well as public demonstrations (e.g., wanting to give an outstanding speech). Anywhere in which competence evaluation energizes or directs behavior (either appetitively or aversively), competence motivation is operative.

Second, competence motivation has a substantial impact on emotion and well-being. The affective reactions people have in response to positive and negative outcomes in competence-relevant settings clearly reflect an investment in attaining competence and avoiding incompetence. Not surprisingly, positive outcomes typically lead to affects such as joy, pride, and happiness, whereas negative outcomes lead to affects such as sadness, shame, and anxiety (Heckhausen, 1984; Lewis, Alessandri, & Sullivan, 1992; Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992). Researchers have also demonstrated that the precise nature of affective experience following positive or negative outcomes can vary as a function of approach and avoidance motivation. Approach-oriented, positive outcomes produce joy and pride, whereas avoidance-oriented, positive outcomes produce relief. Approach-oriented negative outcomes tend to produce sadness and disappointment, whereas avoidance-oriented negative outcomes tend to produce shame and distress (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Roseman, 1991; Stein & Levine, 1989; see also Carver & Scheier, 1998; Mowrer, 1960). The approach-avoidance nature of competence motivation has implications for overall well-being as well. For example, research has shown that the pursuit of avoidance (relative to approach)

goals leads to a decrease in life satisfaction and physical health over time (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997), because avoidance goals are not as effective at providing people with the competence experiences they need for continued growth and development (Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997).

Third, competence motivation is operative across the lifespan. It is clearly manifested differently at different ages. The initial manifestation of competence motivation, effectance motivation (White, 1959), is presumed to be present at birth; it is an appetitive desire to explore and master the environment, reflected in the infant's natural tendency toward curiosity and exploratory play. As children acquire greater representational capacities, encounter an array of socialization experiences, and are marked by positive and negative competence-relevant events, this rudimentary form of motivation develops and differentiates (See Dweck, 2002; Elliot et al., 2002). Specifically, children begin to use different standards for evaluating competence; they begin to represent competence at higher levels of abstraction, and they begin to focus on avoiding incompetence as well as on approaching competence. This process of differentiation continues into adulthood, and competence motivation often becomes increasingly intertwined with other motivational concerns commonly activated in competence-relevant settings (e.g., self-presentation concerns, affiliative concerns, self-worth concerns). In the elderly, diminishing opportunities to exercise their competencies, along with a gradual decline in their skills and abilities, may prompt a modest decline in competence motivation (Veroff, Depner, Kukla, & Douvan, 1980; or, more precisely, may increase competence-relevant motivation focused on the avoidance of incompetence, Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Nevertheless, competence motivation remains important, and competence outcomes continue to impact emotion and well-being deep into old age (Geppert & Halisch, 2001; Halisch & Geppert, 2001). Indeed, successful old age may be a function of finding newer and more appropriate competence-relevant goals to pursue. Thus, the intensity and extent of competence motivation, its specific manifestations, and the

typical settings in which it is operative may change considerably over time, but a desire for competence and an investment in competence-relevant strivings remains invariant from infancy to old age (Brim, 1990; Heckhausen & Schultz, 1995).

Fourth, competence motivation is evident in all individuals across cultural boundaries. Much as competence motivation may be manifested differently at different ages, this motivation may take on different appearances in different cultures. For example, relative to the competence motivation of persons from Western cultures (e.g., Canada, the United States, Western Europe), those from Eastern cultures (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea) appears to be more group- and socially oriented (Chang, Wong, & Teo, 2000), more grounded in obligation and responsibility (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999), more avoidance-oriented (Eaton & Dembo, 1999), and more focused on improvement (Heine et al., 2001). Furthermore, studies show that competence-relevant words such as "success," "failure," and "learn" have different connotations in different countries (Li, 2003; Maehr & Nicholls, 1980). We contend that underlying the different meanings and manifestations of competence motivation in different cultures lies a similar desire for and commitment to competence (see also Bandura, 2001; for a conceptual parallel with regard to positive self-regard, see Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Indeed, data indicate that competence is an important concept that is highly valued by individuals across a wide diversity of cultures (Li, 2003; Van de Vliert & Janssen, 2002), and that competence-relevant outcomes strongly influence emotion and well-being across cultures (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

In summary, we contend that competence is a construct optimally suited to serve as the conceptual core in the achievement motivation literature. Competence can be seen as a basic psychological need that has a pervasive impact on daily affect, cognition, and behavior, across age and culture. As such, competence would seem to represent not only an ideal cornerstone on which to rest the achievement motivation literature but also a foundational building block for any theory of personality, development, and well-being.

ADDRESSING THE WEAKNESSES OF THE ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION LITERATURE

It should now be clear how grounding the achievement motivation literature in the competence construct addresses the weaknesses of the literature. The first weakness of the achievement motivation literature that we identified is that it lacks coherence and a clear set of structural parameters. Because competence can be defined in a precise fashion, it provides a clear criterion for what should and should not be considered a part of the achievement motivation literature, and thus provides much needed guidelines for empirical and theoretical work. Empirically, grounding achievement motivation research in competence provides a benchmark for how constructs should be operationalized: They should focus on competence as directly as possible. The result is likely to be a sharpening and increased uniformity of manipulations and measures that will likely produce more comparable results that are easier to interpret. Theoretically, grounding achievement motivation models in competence provides an orienting point, a conceptual North Star to help theorists navigate the achievement motivation universe. The result is likely to be more parsimonious theoretical frameworks that allow the literature to progress more straightforwardly and rapidly.

The second weakness of the achievement motivation literature that we identified earlier is that it is too narrowly focused and limited in scope. Although competence may be defined in precise fashion, it is nevertheless a highly inclusive concept that is much more widely applicable than a colloquially based understanding of "achievement." Establishing competence as the central focus of the literature makes evident the links between standard achievement motivation foci and other explicitly competence-based constructs such as social competence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), emotional competence (Cherniss, 2001), cognitive competence (Bertrand, Willis, & Sayer, 2001), health competence (Marks & Lutgendorf, 1999), cultural competence (Chin, 2002), and moral competence (Haight, 2000). Links to other constructs (and, accordingly, literatures) that are grounded in competence,

such as the control construct (Skinner, 1995), the power construct (Halisch & Geppert, 2001), the agency construct (Bakan, 1966), and the cognitive mastery construct (Kelley, 1967), also become clear. Indeed, many of the most central topics in the psychological literature, such as the self-concept and self-esteem, have competence at their core (Harter, 1999; James, 1890; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), and issues regarding competence and competence motivation are often at the heart of cross-cultural and lifespan analyses of behavior. Thus, placing competence at the center of the achievement motivation literature expands its conceptual reach considerably and forges integrative links among domains of inquiry.

In summary, grounding the achievement motivation literature in competence addresses both of the weaknesses of the achievement motivation literature that we have identified. Although the provision of *any* precise definition of “achievement” would be a welcome addition to the literature, using competence as this definition is particularly appealing given its clarity and flexibility as a construct, and its broad and integrative reach. It is our hope that, over time, the term “competence motivation” will take the place of the term “achievement motivation,” and that a host of both established and upcoming researchers will join us under this conceptual umbrella.

OVERVIEW OF THE HANDBOOK OF COMPETENCE AND MOTIVATION

It was in this spirit that we conceived the present volume. We approached scholars who have made enduring contributions to the achievement motivation literature and asked them to think about their work in terms of competence. We also brought in people who might not typically identify with the field of achievement or achievement motivation but who would resonate to the concept of competence, and we asked them to cast their area of expertise in terms of competence.

Specifically, we gave our authors the charge of bringing their area of inquiry under the umbrella of the competence construct by rethinking their basic concepts and processes in terms of competence. The first

section of the volume focuses on the central constructs in the achievement motivation literature: intelligence and ability (competence itself); competence-relevant motives and goals, which shape people's competence-based strivings; the perceived causes of competence (and incompetence) and the consequences of perceived competence; the different ways in which people value competence; people's conceptions of competence and its role in motivation; and competence-relevant anxiety, an emotion that affects what people strive for and how successfully (or unsuccessfully) they do so.

Next come developmental issues. How does temperament shape competence and competence motivation? How does the development of self-conscious emotions and cognitive abilities influence competence motivation? And how do competence and competence motivation change over the lifespan? These issues are fundamental to our understanding of competence-relevant processes.

Questions of development continue as the focus turns to the impact of socialization agents and contexts. What are the roles of parents, peers, teachers, and coaches? What about schools and workplaces? How do government policies, such as high-stakes testing, affect the desire for and the acquisition of competence?

The issue of socialization and contexts is carried further as the next chapters consider the role of gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status in competence motivation. Here, the impact of stereotypes comes to the fore, as do questions regarding the critical role of culture in competence—in what it means, how it is gained, and how it is displayed.

The final section explores different facets of self-regulation. Self-regulatory processes may be seen as the means through which people pursue and attain competence, and they may also be seen as competencies in and of themselves. The chapters focus on various forms of self-regulation, such as self-regulated learning, coping, cognitive strategies, and social comparison. They examine motivational states that foster competence processes, such as intrinsic motivation, flow, and creativity. Finally, they examine conscious and deliberate self-regulation and powerful automatic processes that take place outside of awareness.

We are delighted by the many fresh and fascinating insights that our authors generated as they considered their work from the perspective of competence. We hope that our readers will find these chapters as original, thought-provoking, and enlightening as we do.

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NOTE

1. Positing the existence of basic psychological needs such as competence or belongingness (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995) was once highly controversial (and, for some, continues to be so), but in the past few years, it has become much more widely accepted. Space considerations preclude us from reviewing the evidence supporting competence as a basic psychological need; we refer the interested reader to Deci and Ryan (1990) and Elliot et al. (2002).

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