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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to investigate the role of expectations in self-concept and level of aspiration (LOA) behavior. Specifically, the focus was to investigate self-concept and LOA as covariates and to describe the nature of the relationship if, in fact, one existed. A sample of 80 third and fourth grade students was selected from three rural midwestern elementary schools. The measures of self-concept included a non-verbal self-concept test (Pictorial Self Concept Scale), a frequency count of the self-rewarding statements selected following each performance trial, and the positive-negative value of the self-evaluations made following each performance trial. Results of the data concluded that: (1) low-positive discrepancy-LOA behavior appears to be related to the Middle range of reported self-concept scores, in the male sample; (2) high self-concept in males may in fact indicate a high self-concept or it may indicate ego-defensiveness; and (3) size and direction of goal discrepancy plus direction of goal shift following success and failure need to be considered together in studying LOA behavior. (Author/PC)

Level of Aspiration: A Behavioral Expression of Self-Concept

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The present study was designed to investigate the role of expectations in self-concept and level of aspiration (LOA) behavior.

Theory of achievement motivation is based heavily on the role of expectations as determiners of the type of goals individuals set on a short-term or immediate basis (Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Atkinson & Raynor, 1974). Expectations here are defined as subjective estimates of the probabilities of certain performance outcomes, and are based on previous experience with the task or similar tasks. Within the framework of achievement motivation theory, LOA is determined by the relative probabilities (expectations) and valences of success and failure at the task. Two of the most frequently used measures of LOA have been the size and direction of the discrepancy between a performance and subsequent goal and the direction of the shift or change in the goal following performance trials. Sears (1941) found that subjects could be grouped on the basis of goal discrepancy patterns and that these patterns were associated with previous experience with the task. She found that subjects who had experienced repeated failures tended to set goals either below their previous level of performance (LOP) creating a negative discrepancy (ND) or unusually high above their previous LOP creating a high positive discrepancy (HPD). Subjects with a history of success experiences tended to set goals moderately above their previous LOP which she labeled low positive discrepancy (LPD).

Shifts in the LOA following success or failure on a performance trial are referred to as "Typical" or "Atypical" to describe the patterns most frequently observed and the most consistent with achievement motivation theory (Atkinson and Feather, 1966). "Typical shifts are changes in an upward direction of the LOA following trials where the new performance either meets or exceeds the LOA set for that trial or shifts in a downward direction when the performance falls short of the LOA. "Atypical" shifts are shifts running contrary to these conditions. Several studies have been reviewed which indicate a relationship between anxiety and the type of goal shifts made on performance trials where goals are included. (Atkinson and Feather, 1966)

Frank (1935), primarily interested in identifying individual difference in LOA responding, proposed that the height of the LOA was dependent upon the relative strengths of three needs: 1) to keep LOA as high as possible regardless of the LOP, 2) to make LOA approximate LOP, and 3) to avoid failure. He later combined needs 1 and 3 under a single defensive function of protecting the ego-level when it was involved in a task. He also theorized that the relative strengths of these three needs would be determined in part by factors within the individuals. The ego-level as a factor could arouse and increase the strength of two defensive needs, to keep LOA as high as possible and to avoid failure. While the need to keep LOA as high as possible would tend to create large positive discrepancies between the LOP and the LOA, the need to avoid failure would tend to suppress the LOA and perhaps even keep it below the LOP and create a negative discrepancy approximating the HPD and ND groups identical by Sears. This would also suggest that HPD and ND goal setting patterns represent ego-detensive behavior.

Diggory (1966) agrees with the definition of expectations given previously but would add estimates of the subject's competence as a source for expectations. These competence estimates may come from experience with the task but they may also come for evaluations made on the performances of the subject either by himself or some other person whom the subject accepts as a source for such evaluations (Webster and Sobieszek, 1974). Diggory found that expectations represented an index of self-evaluations and that by manipulating these probability estimates he was able to bring about changes in the self-evaluations made by individual subjects.

The literature in both self-concept theory and achievement motivation theory is highly suggestive of a close relationship between self-concept and LOA through expectations. The focus of the present study was to investigate self-concept and LOA as covariates and to describe the nature of the relationship if in fact one was found.

Methods

Subjects

A sample of 80 third and fourth grade students was selected from three rural midwestern elementary schools. The sample included equal numbers of males and females.

Instrumentation

The measures of self-concept included a non-verbal self-concept test, a frequency count of the self-rewarding statements selected following each performance trial, and the positive-negative value of the self-evaluations made following each performance trial. The non-verbal self-concept test was the Pictorial

Self-Concept Scale (Bolea, Felker, and Barnes, 1971). This scale is a pictorial, non-verbal measure using a modified Q-sort technique. Subjects are given 50 cards each with a picture of one or more children depicted in some social or private setting. The subject is asked to decide if the central person in the card is "Like" him, "Sometimes Like" him, or "Not Like" him. The weighted value of the card and the Q-sort placement are used for scoring.

The measures of LOA included the size and direction of the discrepancy between LOP and LOA, and the type of goal shifts (typical or atypical) displayed by each subject. Typical shifts are defined as changes of the goal in an upward direction following performance trials in which the goal was met or exceeded, and changes in a downward direction following performances where the goal was not. Atypical shifts are just the opposite i.e. down following success and up following failure.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that when subjects were classified according to the size and direction of the discrepancy between a performance and subsequent goal using the three discrepancy patterns described by Sears (1941) the LPD group would:

H_1: report higher self-concept scores than either the HPD or the ND groups.

H_2: make higher self-evaluations following performances than either of the other two groups.

H_3: make more typical goal shifts than either of the other two groups.

H_4: select more positive self-referent statements than either of the other two groups.

Procedures

Each subject participated in six different performance tasks with 10 trials per task. Three of these tasks were cognitive school related tasks, and the other three were psychomotor and non-school. (A description of these tasks can be obtained from the authors upon request.)

Upon entering the room each subject was seated at a table in front of a display peg-board. The display board, similar to the one described by Diggory (1966), was used to inform the subject of his score on each trial and to remind him of performances on earlier trials. Scores were indicated by inserting a colored golf tee into the appropriate hole. Each subject was then presented with nine statements previously ordered on a continuum of positiveness by fourth grade pupils (Felker and Thomas, 1971). A scale value equal to the mean of the ratings by the fourth grade pupils was assigned to each statement. Examples of the statements are:

"I always fail."

"I do things correctly most of the time."

"I'm not as smart as most kids."

The subject was asked to read the list of statements out loud to the experimenter. Subjects were helped in reading the statements whenever such help was required.

Specific instructions were given for each task. Six tasks were administered in separate sessions separated by about two weeks. When the experimenter was certain that the nature of the task was understood by the subject first trial was begun. The level of performance was predetermined and, unknown to the subject each trial was stopped when he had reached that level regardless of the time

expired. Upon completion of the trial, the score obtained was indicated on the display board. The subject was then given a random list of the nine self-referenced statements. The order of the sentences was changed for each trial. The experimenter repeated the following instructions to the subject:

> "Pretend that the boy (girl) in our story were you right now, which of these things would he (she) say to himself (herself)? Choose the statement which Bob (Sally) would say to himself (herself) if he (she) were you right now and say it to yourself."

The subject was reminded of his previous performance, asked to state a goal for his next performance, and then asked to rate himself on that performance using a scale from 1-5 with 5 representing "Very Good" and 1 representing "Poor."

Results

Subjects were grouped based on the size and direction of the discrepancy between their performance and subsequent goal. Discrepancy score means and standard deviations were computed for each of the six tasks. Those subjects who on at least 25 percent of the trials set goals below the level of their previous performance were grouped under the heading ND. All subjects who set goals more than one standard deviation above their previous performance were identified as HPD. The remaining subject represented the more moderate range of discrepancy scores were included in the Low Positive Discrepancy group (LPD).

Hypotheses 1-4 predicted specific self-concept behavior associated with the discrepancy groups. It was predicted in hypothesis 1 that the LPD group would report higher self-concept scores than the other two groups. A 2 X 3

analysis of variance (Sex X Discrepancy group) revealed no significant differences associated with sex ($F_{1,74}=1.00, p > 10$) or discrepancy group ($F_{2,74}=1.00, p > 10$). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations from each of the discrepancy groups. An examination of the variability among the groups indicated that the LPD male group was conspicuously more homogeneous than any other group.

Subjects were also grouped by self-concept pretest score using the Pictorial Self-Concept Scale (Bolea, Felker, and Barnes, 1971). The intervals were set to represent Low, Middle, and High self-concept using one half of a standard deviation above and below the mean as the upper and lower limits of the Middle group. All scores falling outside this interval were grouped as Low or High self-concept. Separate 3 X 3 contingency tables were set up for male and female subjects using three levels of self-concept and three discrepancy groups (See Tables 2 & 3). The observed X^2 for the male sample was significant ($X^2 = 21.56, p < .005$) while this was not the case for the female sample ($X^2 = 3.34, p > .05$). The cell frequencies indicate a positive relationship between LPD as a goal setting pattern and moderate self-concept for the male sample. Other cell frequencies indicate the HPD is related to extreme (both high and low) levels of self-concept. No such relationship was observed for the female sample. These results indicate a relationship between discrepancy patterns and reported self-concept score; not, however, in the direction predicted and only for the male sample.

Hypothesis number two predicted higher self-evaluations following performance for the LPD group. Separate one-way analyses of variance were computed for the male and female samples on self-evaluations made following performances on improvement, non-improvement and success trials. Group means,

F-ratios and significance levels are summarized in Table 4. Trials where subjects showed improvement and non-improvement over their previous performance represent all trials while success trials represent a special subset of the total where the new performance meets or exceeds the LOA. The hypothesis was supported by significant differences in self-evaluations made following success trials by both samples ($F_{2,37} = 5.54$, $p < .01$ and $F_{2,37} = 11.72$, $p < .001$, male and female respectively). Although the differences on improvement and non-improvement trials were not significant, they were in the direction predicted.

Hypothesis number three suggested a relationship between discrepancy patterns and the type of goal shifts. It was hypothesized that the LPD groups would make more "Typical" goal shifts than the other discrepancy groups. Again the data were analyzed separately by sex (Table 4). Significant differences were found for both male ($F_{2,37} = 15.07$, $p < .001$) and female ($F_{2,37} = 17.15$, $p < .001$) samples on the number of "Typical" goal shifts made. Contrary to the hypothesis the highest number of "Typical" shifts was made by ND groups of both sexes.

The final hypothesis, number four, predicted more positive statements selected following performance trials by the LPD than either of the other two groups. The same three performance conditions were examined: improvement, non-improvement, and success trials. The results (See Table 4) indicate no differences between the groups for either sex in the number of positive statements selected on improvement or non-improvement trials. When success trials were examined significant differences were found for both sexes, ND groups chose more positive statements than the other two groups of the same sex. These data are misleading in the sense that not all groups experienced the same number successes. Percentages were computed to indicate what proportion of all statements made on success

trials by each group were positive. These percentages are reported in Table 4. No significant differences were found in the percentages for either sex although the observed percentage differences were in the direction predicted. Hypothesis number four received limited support.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature suggests that the probability estimates of potential success or failure held by an individual are products of his experience and evaluations of his performances in that area, and that they act to influence the goals which the individual sets (LOA) for future performance. A personality trait was indicated underlying the LOA behavior. Self-concept theorists have used the construct of expectation to explain basic self-concept behavior. The present study sought to investigate the relationship between self-concept as an underlying personality trait and LOA behavior using expectation as the mechanism. The sample of 40 male and 40 female third and fourth grade children participated on six LOA tasks. Three measures of self-concept (self-evaluations, positive self-referenced statements, a pictorial self-concept test) and two measures of LOA behavior were collected and analyzed using 2 X 3 and one-way analysis of variance plus X^2 statistical analyses. All subjects were grouped under two different classification schemas (level of self-concept and discrepancy score pattern) to test the several hypotheses.

Subjects were grouped into one of three performance-goal discrepancy groups (ND, LPD, HPD). According to the work of Frank and others, ND and HPD patterns represent ego-defensive behavior while LPD is the more desirable and

realistic pattern in terms of personal adjustment. It was predicted that the LPD group would report higher self-concept scores, more "typical" goal shifts, higher self-evaluations, and choose more positive statements than the other two groups.

The results showed no significant differences between self-concept scores reported by any of the discrepancy groups of either sex. It was observed that the LPD male group was more homogeneous than any of the other groups suggesting a closer look at the predicted relationship. Using a 3 X 3 contingency table with three levels of self-concept and three levels of discrepancy grouping it was observed that 14 of 18 males in the LPD group were also classified as Middle self-concept. The 9 low self-concept males were predominantely split between ND (3) and HPD (5) categories supporting the position taken by Frank that ego defensive behavior would lead to goals of two types: (1) LOA as high as possible without consideration for LOP and (2) LOA below the LOP to reduce the chances of failure. Of the 22 subjects displaying ego-defensive goal-setting patterns (HPD or ND) 11 also reported High and another 8 reported Low self-concept scores supporting a relationship between Low self-concept and ego-defensiveness and suggesting that High self-concept in males may very likely be more defensive than accurate in many cases. Jourard (1971) makes the statement that a person who is well adjusted and self-accepting is more willing to participate in self-disclosure of personal feelings including strengths as well as weaknesses. On self-report measures of self-concept disclosures of weakness have the effect of suppressing the total score. A person then who is well adjusted and willing to acknowledge inadequacies may score lower than a more defensive person who cannot or is not willing to reveal feelings of personal inadequacies. This argument is supported by the observed relationship between LPD and moderate

levels of self-concept. A similar X^2 analysis made for the female sample revealed no relationship between LOA pattern and self-concept. This finding is consistent with other findings (Horner, 1974) suggesting that LOA theory has different application for female subjects.

As predicted LPD males and females did evaluate their performances significantly higher than the other groups but on success trials only. This finding in the male sample may also be seen as supportive of the relationship between LOA and a more realistic self-concept. Success trials are the most critical in terms of slef-evaluations in the sense that the goal used as the criteria for success may also be used as the criteria for self-rewarding behavior. This explanation receives some support from the percentage of positive statements selected on success trials. The ND groups because of the level of their goals experienced more total successes allowing the possibility of more positive statements to be selected. The percentage differences although not significant did indicate that LPD groups did choose proportionately more positive statements than the other groups.

It is observed that ND male and female subjects made significantly more goal shifts than the HPD group. The criteria for a "typical" as opposed to "atypical" goal shift deal only with the direction of the shift following success and failure conditions. The results of this study indicated that in a LOA task where repeated performance is required on the same task the direction of the shift in LOA cannot be considered alone as a criteria for realistic or "typical" shift patterns. It is possible to raise the LOA following success but set the new goal below the previous performance. An additional criterion needs to be imposed on "typical" shifts; goal discrepancy and direction of shift must be considered together in judging the realistic nature of LOA behavior.

In conclusion three statements need to be highlighted: (1) LPD-LOA behavior appears to be related to the Middle range of reported self-concept scores, in the male sample, (2) High self-concept in males may in fact indicate a high self-concept or it may indicate ego-defensiveness, and (3) size and direction of goal discrepancy plus direction of goal shift following success and failure need to be considered together in studying LOA behavior.

Table 1

2 X 3 Anova

Sex X Discrepancy Groups

Pictorial Self-Concept Scores

Group	Sex	Mean	SD	F	P
ND	male	64.17	8.12		
	female	64.38	10.12		
LPD	male	65.68	2.86	1.00	NS
	female	65.23	8.83		
HPD	male	65.22	9.40		
	female	65.43	6.40		

Table 2

X^2 Contingency Table

Self-Concept Discrepancy Group

(Male)

	LSC	MSC	HSC
ND	E 1.80 0 3	3.40 3	2.32 2
LPD	4.05 1	7.65 14	6.30 3
HPD	3.15 5	5.95 0	4.90 9

$X^2 = 21.56$, $p < .005$

Table 3

X^2 Contingency Table

Self-Concept X Discrepancy Group

(Female)

	LSC	MSC	HSC
ND	E 3.85 O 4	4.55 6	5.60 4
LPD	3.58 2	4.23 5	5.20 5
HPD	3.58 5	4.23 2	5.20 6

$X^2 = 3.34$, $p > .05$

Table 4

Analyses of Self-Evaluations, Goal Shifts and Postivie Statements by Discrepancy Groups – Separate by Sex

Variable	Sex	ND	LPD	HPD	F	F
Self-evaluation Improvement Trials	male	3.72	3.87	3.79	1.00	NS
	female	3.75	4.06	3.83	1.70	NS
Self-evaluation Non-Improvement Trials	male	3.15	3.25	3.36	1.00	NS
	female	3.02	3.21	3.63	2.12	NS
Self-evaluation Success Trials	male	3.83	4.11	2.97	5.54	.01
	female	3.82	4.39	3.11	11.72	.001
Typical goal shifts	male	6.17	5.00	3.55	15.07	.001
	female	6.41	6.05	3.62	18.15	.001
Positive Statements Improvement Trials	male	4.77	5.62	5.39	1.11	NS
	female	4.86	5.75	5.68	1.56	NS
Positive Statements Non-Improvement Trials	male	4.77	2.15	2.07	1.00	NS
	female	1.87	2.23	2.32	1.29	NS
Positive Statements Success Trials	male	3.50	3.09	1.32	24.98	.001
	female	3.50	3.40	1.56	10.42	.001
Positive Statements % on	male	70	83	79	Z=1.50	NS
	female	68	85	79	Z=1.41	NS