

Students' interpersonal relationships, personal best (PB) goals, and academic engagement[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Informed by self-determination theory, the aims of this study were to examine the extent to which students' interpersonal relationships (a basic psychological need) with teachers, parents, and peers are associated with personal best (PB) goals and academic engagement, as well as the extent to which PB goals are associated with academic engagement beyond the effects of interpersonal relationships. With a sample of 3232 students (aged 11–19) from independent schools catering to day and boarding students in major cities in the US, Canada, and the UK, we used structural equation modeling to examine the associations among these constructs. Students' perceptions of teacher, parent, and peer relationships were associated with PB goals and the three types of academic engagement: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. In addition, there were significant indirect effects via PB goals from teacher and peer relationships to cognitive and behavioral engagement. These results provide new understanding of the relative salience of associations among interpersonal relationships, PB goals, and academic engagement. They also suggest that PB goals are one mechanism by which interpersonal relationships may connect with academic engagement. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research has sought to understand the precise means and mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships can influence students' outcomes, including their academic engagement (see Martin & Dowson, 2009 for a review; see also Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012 for recent contributions). The current study explores goals as one construct that potentially connects the body of research investigating interpersonal relationships and that investigating academic engagement. Specifically, it examines the extent to which students' perceptions of interpersonal relationships may be associated with adaptive goals and academic engagement, as well as the extent to which adaptive goals may also be associated with academic engagement. Following recent emphasis in the literature on growth-oriented goals (Anderman, Gimbert, O'Connell, & Riegel, 2015; Dweck, 2006, 2012; Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011; Elliot, Murayama, Kobeisy, & Lichtendfeld, 2014; Martin, 2015a; Martin & Elliot, 2015a, 2015b; Martin & Liem, 2010), we focus on personal best (PB) goals. PB goals are defined as specific, challenging, and competitively self-referenced goals that involve a level of performance, strategy, or effort that meets or exceeds an

individual's previous best (Martin, 2006). Specifically, we examine the extent to which students' perceptions of relationships with teachers, parents and peers are associated with PB goals and the extent to which PB goals (beyond the effects of interpersonal relationships) are associated with cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement at school.

PB goals and academic engagement have both been associated with positive academic outcomes (e.g., academic achievement; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Martin & Liem, 2010). In the current study, we sought to extend knowledge of these constructs in relation to interpersonal relationships. From previous research, it is known that students' perceptions of interpersonal relationships with teachers, parents (including non-parental caregivers), and peers predict academic engagement (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, & Green, 2009). It is also known that the same three relationships predict students' tendency to pursue PB goals (e.g., Martin et al., 2009) and through separate studies that PB goals predict academic engagement (e.g., Martin & Liem, 2010). What is less well understood is the relative salience of the three types of relationships in linking with PB goals, or how interpersonal relationships and PB goals function in relation to academic engagement when considered in the same model.

Thus, in order to extend the literature, the current study utilized multivariate analyses to examine students' perceptions of interpersonal relationships, PB goals, and academic engagement concurrently (see Fig. 1). This research is important as it will address several empirical gaps in the literature. In particular, it will shed light on the unique associations

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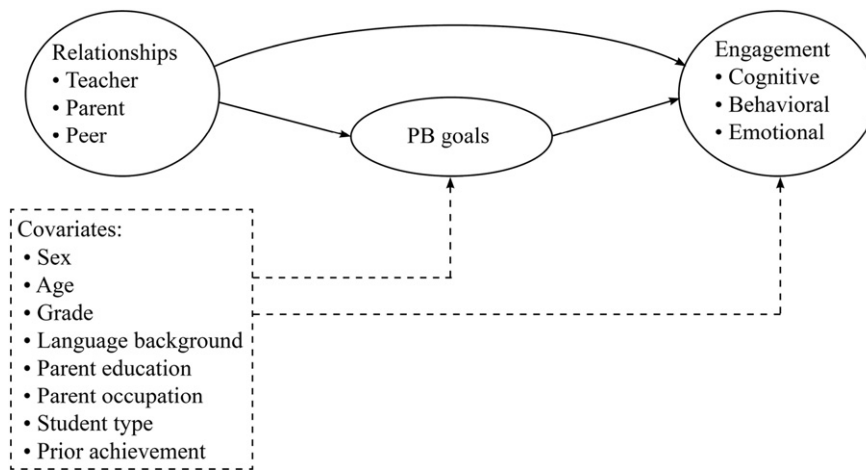


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of interpersonal relationships, PB goals, and engagement. Solid lines represent paths between substantive factors. Dashed lines represent paths between covariates and outcome factors.

that interpersonal relationships and PB goals have with academic engagement. It will also reveal whether or not PB goals remain significantly associated with academic engagement when interpersonal relationships are considered simultaneously. This is important for developing understanding of the relatively new construct of PB goals. In addition to our empirical rationale, there is also a theoretical basis for conducting this examination. In the current study, we give some emphasis to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) as it articulates substantive bases upon which interpersonal relationships, goals, and academic engagement may be connected.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2012) proposes that when individuals experience a sense of fulfillment of the needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence, they are more likely to experience autonomous motivation, well-being, and other positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement; Jang et al., 2012). In the current study, we focus on the need for relatedness, which refers to the need to feel cared for by others and to feel personal acceptance by and significance to others (Deci & Ryan, 2012). We operationalized relatedness as high quality interpersonal relationships and examine it with respect to teachers, parents (including non-parental caregivers), and peers.

SDT provides support for hypothesized associations between interpersonal relationships and PB goals. This centers on the ideas of internalization and self-determination. SDT states that positive relationships with important others mean that individuals are more likely to internally endorse (i.e., internalize) the values and beliefs of those others (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). When important others value academic growth (such as in the case of teachers, parents, and ideally peers), this means that the values of academic growth are more likely to be internalized. We suggest it is this process of internalization that helps to promote PB goals (academic growth). In addition, PB goals are created for, by, and about students. When a student creates a PB goal, it is a goal for the student (not for someone else), determined by the student (the student is in charge of the content), and it is about his or her own progress or products (self-referenced, not other-person-referenced). As such, PB goals emphasize students' volition and choice, and are self-determined—key factors promoted by need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Further support for the relevance of SDT in examining goals has emerged in recent theorizing. Whereas SDT has traditionally looked at autonomous and controlled reasons for engaging in a behavior, research

is now considering these reasons in relation to setting and pursuing goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014). More precisely, scholars have suggested that goals can be separated by the extent to which they are based on autonomous or controlled reasons (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). We suggest that autonomous reasons for setting and pursuing goals are highly relevant for the construct of PB goals given that these goals are self-focused and self-determined. Thus, taken together there are several grounds that support the relevance of SDT for examining and understanding associations between relatedness and PB goals.

The links that interpersonal relationships and PB goals have with academic engagement are also supported through SDT. Specifically, when individuals experience a sense of relatedness, they are likely to be more self-determined in their actions (and goals, as we have argued above), and experience positive outcomes such as greater academic engagement as a result (e.g., Jang et al., 2012). At this point, we should mention that although we have not focused on the needs for competence and autonomy, they may be somewhat implicated in PB goals given that these goals are derived from students' current competencies (students feel competent in relation to what they can already do; Martin, 2006) and are created by students themselves (autonomy). PB goals, therefore, by their very nature may help to address the needs for competence and autonomy, and in combination with high-quality interpersonal relationships, the need for relatedness as well. Taken together, SDT provides theoretical support for the relationships we have examined in the current study. Next, we provide further details about the three substantive constructs under examination along with supporting empirical evidence.

1.2. Interpersonal relationships

The importance of positive interpersonal relationships for healthy human functioning has been demonstrated by a substantial body of literature (e.g., Creasey et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Fernet, Gagné, & Austin, 2010). High-quality interpersonal relationships, and the sense of relatedness that they cultivate, support positive student outcomes in several ways. They foster social, emotional, and academic development and healthy functioning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009). They involve important processes that affect individuals' lives including modeling, feedback, and support from significant others (Martin et al., 2009). They also allow individuals to learn how to function effectively in particular contexts and promote internalization of the beliefs of significant and valued others (Wentzel, 1999).

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