

# Value orientations as determinants and outcomes of conflicts between on-task and off-task actions in the classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Off-task behavior in the classroom was conceptualized as a manifestation of students pursuing goals they bring into the classroom aside from achievement goals. Regulation during on-task and off-task behavior in action conflict scenarios was elaborated on using the constructs motivational interference and flow. It was argued that achievement and well-being values that students hold can be determinants as well as outcomes of these conflict experiences. Data from 697 students (mean age 13.43) was collected at two time points within one school year. Results supported a reciprocal model in which value orientations (t1) lead to conflict variables (t2) as well as conflict variables (t1) to value orientations (t2).

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## 1. Introduction

Imagine Daniel sitting in class. The teacher has just explained a math problem and wants the students to solve similar ones. Daniel works hard. He knows that something like this will be in the next exam. Suddenly his friend passes him a note underneath the table and wants him to read it. Daniel is torn between reading the note and following the lesson.

Situations like this are common in classrooms and student engagement in off-task behavior in class is a widespread phenomenon. Past research has often focused on off-task behavior as an indicator of students breaking classroom norms and as deviant behavior with negative consequences for student learning and teacher well-being (Doyle, 2006; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Hastings & Bham, 2003; Helmke, 1986). A different perspective is taken if one considers that students engaging in these activities pursue goals they bring into the classroom aside from achievement goals such as “having fun” and “making or keeping friendships” (Boekaerts, de Koning, & Vedder, 2006; de Lemos & Goncalves, 2004; Wentzel, 1989). In this case, off-task behavior can be reconstructed as a manifestation of students' multiple motivations in class (Hofer, 2007): Students do not display off-task behavior because they want to disturb, rather they try to reach non-curricular goals aside from their learning goals. Accordingly, the conflict students like Daniel experience between on-task and off-task actions in class is a conflict

between two actions that both may be important to them. The degree of importance students attach to actions can be seen as having their origin in students' values. Values seem especially applicable to such conflict situations in which students have to prioritize between actions, because values are ordered by importance in a system of priorities (Schwartz, 2006). Indeed, Kilian, Hofer, Fries, and Kuhnle (2010) found the extent students value well-being and achievement to be related to the experiences they report during on- and off-task behavior when confronted with action conflict scenarios between those two. Values were conceived as determinants of students' experiences in conflicts. The cross-sectional design of the data, however, left the direction of the relationship unclear. In the present paper, the Kilian et al. (2010) study is extended to a longitudinal design and it will be argued that the influence is reciprocal: It is assumed that value orientations influence the experience of motivational interference in action conflict situations, but also that experiences students have dealing with these conflicts might change their values over time. These assumptions are studied using scenarios of action conflicts in class.

### 1.1. Motivational action conflict and motivational interference

A motivational action conflict is defined as a situation in which two or more action alternatives that offer positive incentives are available but cannot be realized at the same time (Schmid et al., 2007). Already Atkinson and Birch (1970) argued that at any particular time, individuals have tendencies to engage in mutually incompatible activities. Gollwitzer (1990) pointed out that shielding mindsets protecting from competing goal intentions are necessary to stabilize actions. The concept of motivational interference describes the extent

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to which this shielding mindset fails and failures in self-regulation occur due to the motivational properties of an alternative activity interfering with the action being performed (Fries, Dietz, & Schmid, 2008). If Daniel decides to keep following the lesson he might be easily distracted, in a bad mood or feeling that he is missing out on what his friend wants to tell him. On the other hand, if he decides to read the note, he might be distracted from it or suffer from a guilty conscience because he is not following the lesson (Kilian et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Values as determinants and consequences of motivational interference

In searching for determinants of experiences of motivational interference during on- and off-task behavior, it is promising to investigate students' value orientations because values allow prioritization in conflict situations (Schwartz, 1996). Values are beliefs about the desirability of behaviors and events (Fries, Schmid, & Hofer, 2007). Values vary between cultures but also between individuals within the culture. The term value orientation is used to describe the latter. Achievement value orientation describes the amount students value success, future goals, and hard work, while well-being value orientation describes the amount students value leisure and social activities (Dietz, Hofer, & Fries, 2007). They are based on Inglehart's (1997) description of modern and post-modern values. Since modern and post-modern values can coexist (Inglehart, 1997), achievement and well-being value orientation are conceptualized as theoretically independent, that is, a student can highly value both, achievement and well-being.

Cross-sectional studies have shown that these two value orientations were related to the motivational interference students reported in action conflict scenarios between school-related and leisure-type activities (Fries, Schmid, Dietz, & Hofer, 2005; Hofer, Schmid, Fries, Zivkovic, & Dietz, 2009; Kilian et al., 2010). In these studies, value orientations were conceived as determinants of the experience of motivational interference. This follows work that describes values as criteria for the selection and evaluation of goals or behavior (Fries et al., 2007; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Assume Daniel keeps following the lesson despite the note. To the extent he values achievement, goals like "being a good student" which are associated with the action being performed (following the lesson) should be important to him and he should be able to shield himself from interferences. To the extent he values well-being, goals like "keeping friendships" that are associated with the alternative action (reading the note) should be important to him and he should suffer from motivational interference. If Daniel reads the note instead of following the lesson, the opposite effects of achievement and well-being value orientation should emerge.

Though values usually are conceived as antecedents of behavior, they also can be conceptualized as outcomes. Values are relatively stable, but they undergo changes over time (Grube, Mayton, & Ball-Rokeach, 1994). Hofer, Reinders, and Fries (2010) conceptualized value change as an answer to the question "What must I value if I am trying to attain certain goals, and thereby act, feel and think in certain ways?" Thus, values can be inferred through processes of self-perception (Bem, 1972), which are not only based on overt actions but also on cognitions (Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989; Dolinski, 2000). Indeed, in a longitudinal study, Hofer, Schmid, Fries, Kilian, and Kuhnle (in press) found the experiences students reported in conflict scenarios (studying vs. meeting friends; doing homework vs. watching TV) to be related to values two years later and conclude that these experiences seem to influence values to a higher degree than vice versa. Accordingly, we argue that individuals can observe their behavior, feelings and internal reactions in action conflict situations in class and infer holding certain values based on these self-perceptions. If Daniel observes himself repeatedly concentrating on the lesson, he might infer that he places a lot of importance on achievement. If, in contrast, he cannot stop thinking about the note while trying to follow the lesson, ultimately he might infer that well-being is important to him and achievement not. If he reads the note, he will infer placing high importance on achievement

and low importance on well-being, to the extent he is distracted from the note because he knows he should follow the lesson. In sum, students should adapt their values to the degree they experience motivational interference.

### 1.3. Flow during on-task behavior

Another concept that can be used to describe students' experiences during on-task behavior in class in the presence of off-task temptations is "flow". Flow denotes the varying degree a person is immersed in a challenging activity and the extent the self merges with the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Flow does not apply to off-task behavior like reading notes, because no challenge is involved. It seems plausible to assume that value orientations play a role in determining the extent students experience flow: Greater importance of an activity corresponds to greater focused attention (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000), and the more strongly individuals pursue a goal in performing an activity, the higher their flow is (Rheinberg, Manig, Kliegl, Engeser, & Vollmeyer, 2007). Therefore, the degree students experience flow while following the lesson should be the higher, the more important the activity (following the lesson) is and the less important the alternative action (reading the note) is. Accordingly, Daniel's flow while following the lesson should be the higher, the lower his well-being and the higher his achievement value orientation are.

Concerning a potentially reverse influence of flow on values, evidence is inconclusive. In the state of flow, self-reflexivity is lost (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008). Therefore, it is questionable to what extent self-perception can exist when flow is high. If this self-reflexive quality is missing, no influence of flow on values is assumed.

### 1.4. Hypotheses

A full cross-lagged panel design with two time points was implemented to test the hypotheses summarized in Fig. 1.

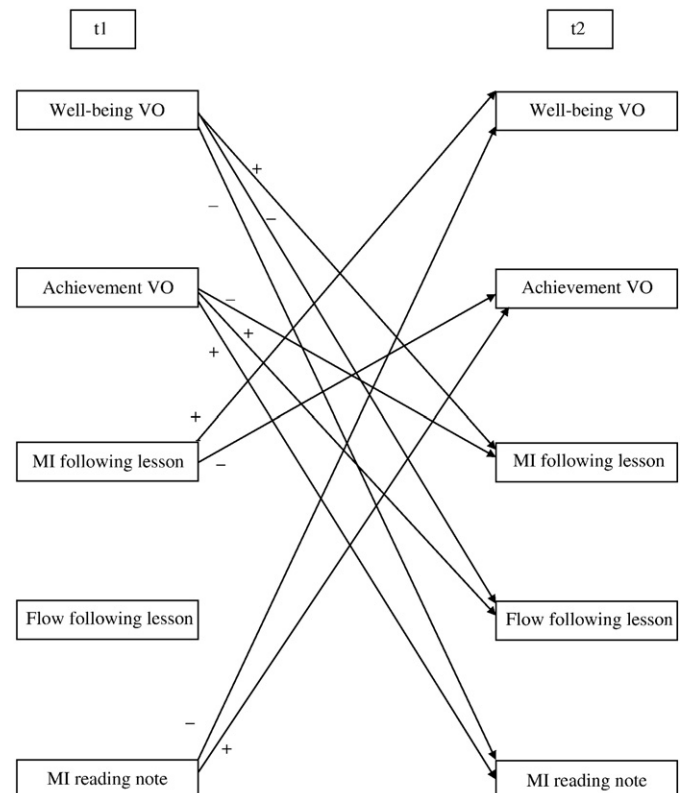


Fig. 1. Hypothesized relationships. VO = value orientation; MI = experience of motivational interference.

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