Individual values, motivational conflicts, and learning for school[☆]

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Abstract

In a self-report study, students ($N = 704$, mean age: 13.5 years) were confronted with two scenarios, depicting situations of motivational conflict. They were asked to choose between a school and a leisure activity. A model was tested with value orientations as determinants and successful self-regulation as the consequence of the decision reached after a motivational conflict. The results showed that value orientations were related to the choice of activities in motivational conflict. Value orientations and decisions also predicted successful self-regulation in the school-related activity. Furthermore, value orientations and self-regulation were positively related to time invested in learning. Direct and indirect effects of value orientations explained high percentages of learning regulation and study time.

1. Conceptual framework

It is increasingly acknowledged that students' learning takes place within a societal context and reflects the values held in the respective culture (e.g., Boekaerts, 2003; Salili, Chiu, & Hong, 2001). Comparative studies contrasting Western with East Asian societies, demonstrated pronounced differences in school-related learning motivation (Helmke & Tuyet, 1999) and the degree to which students feel obliged to go to school, to study at home and to develop their identities (Hoppe-Graff & Kim, 2004; Larson & Verma, 1999). Such differences are attributed to a pronounced diversity of cultures (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). Hofer and Peetsma (2005) argue that the differences between cultures mainly origin from a culture's dominant value orientations.

Values are defined as generalized beliefs about the desirability of behaviours and events (Fries, Schmid, & Hofer, 2007). They do not only vary between cultures but also between individuals within the same culture. Typical examples for values are freedom, security, and achievement. Values are not limited to specific actions, objects or domains, but encompass all aspects of a person's life. Values help the individual to decide which goals to choose by providing criteria for evaluating the convergence between goals and the values the individual approves of. The relevance of values for academic learning, however, has neither been theoretically discussed nor empirically investigated. In a previous

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study (Fries, Schmid, Dietz, & Hofer, 2005), it was shown that individual value orientations—despite their generality—were related to the experience of motivational conflicts and to various aspects of students' learning for school. In line with these results, we assume value orientations to be related to motivational aspects of learning, such as decisions in motivational conflicts between school-related and leisure-related activities. Furthermore, they should be associated with successful self-regulation after confrontation with a temptation during a learning episode. Before addressing the issue of determining the value orientations relevant for learning, the notion of motivational conflict is discussed.

1.1. Multiple goals and motivational conflicts

The first argument of this paper is that students pursue a multitude of goals, which make them susceptible to motivational conflicts, especially between academic and non-academic goals. Goals are defined as representations of specific desirable behavioural objectives (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2002). Furthermore, goals are seen as being cognitively associated to their corresponding means of attainment. Means are actions that are chosen to pursue specific goals. Studies directed at fears and hopes and adolescents' future time perspective provide information on the content of the prevalent goals of adolescents in Western societies. The most frequently mentioned cognitions in these studies fell into the categories "job", "school", "leisure activities", "family", and "possession" (Lanz & Rosnati, 2002; Peetsma, 2000). Hence, this research shows that on one hand adolescents are concerned with education, leading to future jobs, and on the other with leisure time and social relationships.

Pursuing multiple goals can lead to the occurrence of situations, in which different goals are conflicting with each other. In situations, in which two or more competing goals are activated, a student has to decide which goal to pursue right now. Because the pursuit of any goal needs investment of time, attention, and effort, and because resources are limited a person committed to one goal has to take time and resources away from activities related to other competing goals. We understand motivational conflict as resulting from two or more behavioural means associated to negatively interdependent goals. We assume that especially nowadays students—if they are free to decide when to study and when to spend their time with leisure behaviour—experience motivational conflicts. This is especially the case when deciding between school and leisure activities, but also within the domains of school (school—school-conflict) and leisure (leisure—leisure-conflict). Study time excludes socializing and vice versa. Consider, for example, a student who is doing his/her homework. If a friend proposes an attractive leisure activity, the student is likely to experience a motivational conflict. Such motivational conflicts seem to be widespread among adolescents. In the study of Fries et al. (2005), only 11.4% of the school students indicated that they would never experience school—leisure conflicts. Senécal, Julien, and Guay (2003) found that university students differed considerably in the intensity of experiencing conflicts between their role as a student and their role as a friend. Several studies suggest a trade-off between different classes of students' goals, especially between achievement and career goals on one hand and leisure goals on the other (Lens, Lacante, Vansteenkiste, & Herrera, 2005; Peetsma, 2000). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that extracurricular interests, having fun, and pursuing social goals can interfere with time investment in school leading to motivational conflicts.

1.2. Individual value orientations and decisions in motivational conflicts

The second argument in this paper is that students' value orientations influence the decision reached in case of motivational conflicts between school and leisure goals. In contrast to the goal construct, values have no explicit reference to specific behaviours, events or objects. Whereas goals refer to states an individual tries to achieve, a definition of an end-state is usually not part of a value (Fries et al., 2007). Instead, values allow people to decide which goals are to be preferred or avoided, because behaviours, events, and objects can be judged on the basis of their match or mismatch with respect to an individual's value system (Smith & Schwartz, 1997). Values represent a psychological structure with the potential to induce valences in goals (Brendl & Higgins, 1996). Hence, values have motivational power and goals reflect the values behind them.

Before addressing the influence values have on decisions reached within a motivational conflict, the question arises, which values are relevant for decisions between school and leisure activities in the lives of contemporary students. Inglehart (1997) makes the distinction between modern values like hard work, security, and prosperity and post-modern values like tolerance, being together with friends, and self-actualisation. These value dimensions are embedded in a theory of value change that we consider as helpful for the issue at hand. Based on data from the world value