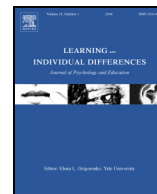




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The impact of fear appeals on subjective-task value and academic self-efficacy: The role of appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that when appraised as threatening, fear appeals (messages that highlight the negative consequences of failure) are related to more negative emotions, maladaptive motivations, and lower grades. This study asks the question of how subjective-task values and academic self-efficacy are related to challenge as well as threat appraisals of fear appeals. Data were collected from 923 students preparing for a high-stakes secondary school leaving examination and analyzed using structural equation modeling. Fear appeals were positively related to subjective-task values and academic self-efficacy when appraised as challenging and negatively related when appraised as threatening. The effectiveness of fear appeals as a motivational strategy depends on how they are interpreted and understood by the student. Teachers require training to be able to judge which messages are likely to be effective for which students.

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1. Introduction

A number of reviews have documented how teacher behavior and instructional style can have a profound influence on student learning as well as achievement-related values, beliefs, and goals (e.g., Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Reeve, 2009; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Wubbels & Breckelmans, 2005). In this study we examine teacher messages used prior to high-stakes examinations that communicate to students the importance and value of these examinations by highlighting the consequences of failure (Putwain & Roberts, 2009; Putwain & Symes, 2014). These communications are referred to as fear appeals. Previous research has shown that, when appraised as threatening, fear appeals are related to a number of educational outcomes including a higher performance-avoidance goal (to avoid performing worse than one's classmates), higher test anxiety, and lower test scores (e.g., Putwain & Best, 2011; Putwain & Symes, 2011a). In the present study this line of research is extended in two ways. First, we examined how fear appeals relate to students' academic self-efficacy (ASE) and their subjective task values (STV). Second, we examined challenge as well as threat appraisals. It was anticipated that fear appeals would show

positive relationships with ASE and STV when appraised as a challenge and negative relationships when appraised as a threat.

1.1. Messages used prior to high-stakes examinations

Prior to high-stakes examinations, teachers, and other school staff, communicate various messages to students. Some of these, such as official school communications, contain largely administrative information, such as the time, date, and venue of the examination. However, teachers may also communicate other messages about the value, importance, and worth of examinations through their instructional dialogue (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Gulek, 2003; Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind, & Sheehy, 2004; Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). These messages are used to highlight how failure can lead to subsequent negative life opportunities (e.g., difficulty in finding a job or continuing in education or training) as a motivational tactic to encourage students to engage with their studies (Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Fear appeals have been more widely studied in the health communications literature to investigate, among others, smoking cessation, safe sex practices, and use of skin protection in the sun (Maloney, Lapinski, & Witte, 2011; Peters, Ruiter, & Kok, 2013). Fear appeals are designed to show how one course of action can lead to negative consequences and how these can be avoided with an alternate course of action (Ruiter, Kessels, Peters, & Kok, 2014; Witte & Allen, 2000). It would appear that fear appeals are also used relatively frequently prior to high-stakes

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examinations. In one study, between 32% and 81%, of secondary school teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the use of fear appeals, depending on the strength of the appeal, (Putwain & Roberts, 2012).

1.2. How are fear appeals appraised?

Putwain and Symes (2014) propose a model of fear appeals appraisal that focuses on two judgments: the personal meaning or importance of the fear appeal and on one's resources or options for responding effectively to the demand made in the fear appeal. Judgments over the personal meaning of the message are likely to be on the basis of STV. Three STVs are outlined in Eccles and colleagues expectancy value theory (e.g., Eccles, 2005, 2007; Eccles, O'Neill, & Wigfield, 2005; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009). These are intrinsic value (a task is interesting and enjoyable), attainment value (success is an important element of self-identity), and utility value (the task contributes to short or long-term goals or aspirations). If a student has high attainment or utility value they are likely to perceive the fear appeal as a personally meaningful message. Low attainment or utility value would likely result in the fear appeal being disregarded or ignored. Intrinsic value is unlikely to influence whether a fear appeal is deemed to be meaningful; the likelihood of success or failure does not necessarily pose a risk to task interest or enjoyment.

If the message was deemed personally meaningful, judgments over one's capacity to respond effectively would determine whether a challenge or threat appraisal was most likely. These judgments would be primarily based on action-control expectancies, or ASE: the belief that one can successfully perform a task (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). A challenge appraisal would follow from high ASE and a threat appraisal from low ASE. A challenge appraisal is a mastery-focused mindset that is accompanied by positive emotions (such as hope), and results in approach-orientated cognitions and behaviors (such as engagement). Threat appraisal is focused on self-worth protection, accompanied by negative emotions (such as anxiety), and results in avoidance-orientated cognitions and behaviors (such as strategic withdrawal of effort, or devaluing achievement). Studies have supported the theorized roles of STV and ASE in the appraisal of fear appeals using experimental (Putwain & Symes, 2016), cross-sectional (Putwain, Remedios, & Symes, 2014; Symes & Putwain, 2016; Symes, Putwain, & Remedios, 2015), and longitudinal designs (Putwain & Remedios, 2014a).

The distinction between approach-avoidance motivation (e.g., Elliot, 2008) has been incorporated into some of the major theoretical frameworks that seek to account and explain academic motivation including achievement goals (e.g., Elliot, 2005, 2008; Elliot & Church, 1997) and regulatory focus (e.g., Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008; Molden & Rosenzweig, 2016). The appraisal of a fear appeal would most likely act as a proximal antecedent of approach- or avoidance-orientated emotions, cognitions, and behaviors (Putwain & Woods, 2016). All things being equal, a challenge appraisal would elicit an approach motivation such as a mastery-approach goal (to develop one's task or self-referenced competence) and a promotion-approach regulatory focus (the opportunity to attain a positive outcome); a threat appraisal would elicit a performance-avoidance goal (see Putwain & Symes, 2011b) and a prevention-avoidance regulatory focus (to secure avoiding a negative outcome).

1.3. STV and ASE as outcomes of appraisals

Putwain, Remedios, and Symes (2015), extended the appraisal model to include a feedback loop from STV and ASE to challenge and threat appraisals. That is, STV and ASE are outcomes as well as antecedents of appraisals (i.e., a bidirectional relationship between appraisals and STV/ASE). The results of a longitudinal study over three waves of data collection showed that challenge appraisal predicted higher subsequent attainment value and ASE, and threat appraisal predicted lower subsequent attainment value and ASE, while controlling for prior variance in attainment value and ASE. While this study provided evidence

of a feedback loop from appraisals to attainment value and ASE, it did not examine the possibility of relations between appraisals and utility value. Like attainment value, it would be expected that a challenge appraisal reinforces one's belief to respond effectively to the demand made in the fear appeal whereas a threat appraisal reinforces the belief that one cannot respond effectively. The likely outcome is for a challenge appraisal to be related to higher utility value and for a threat appraisal to be related to lower utility value as a form of self-worth protection (see Loose, Régner, Morin, & Dumas, 2012; Régner & Loose, 2006).

Furthermore, although intrinsic value is not posited as an antecedent of fear appeal appraisals, it is likely to be an outcome. Previous studies have shown that intrinsic value and interest correlate positively with a mastery goal orientation (Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & Tauer, 2008; Hulleman, Durik, Schweigert, & Harackiewicz, 2008), and with achievement emotions such as enjoyment, and negatively with anxiety (Ainley & Ainley, 2011; Stöber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009). Accordingly, the mastery orientation and positive emotions that characterize a challenge appraisal are likely to relate positively to intrinsic value. Conversely, the self-protection focus and negative outcomes that characterize a threat appraisal would likely relate negatively to intrinsic value.

A particular limitation of Putwain et al.'s (2015) study was that frequency of fear appeals used by the teacher was not included. Therefore, it was not possible to examine the indirect relationship of fear appeals to STV and ASE, mediated by challenge and threat appraisals, and address whether fear appeals are leading to adaptive educational outcomes. Consistent with evidence from the social psychology literature that repetitive persuasive messages are more impactful (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1989; Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 2001; Moons, Mackie, & Garcia-Marques, 2009), increased frequency of fear appeals, used by a classroom teacher, is associated with a greater challenge and threat appraisal (Putwain et al., 2014). The repetition of the judgments, self-reflective processes and emotions that accompany the appraisal of fear appeals (e.g., see Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Waters, 2011) would result in differential outcomes depending on whether a challenge or threat appraisal was made. More frequent fear appeals would link positively to STV and ASE when mediated by a challenge appraisal and would link negatively to STV and ASE when mediated by a threat appraisal.

1.4. Aim of the present study

The aim of the present study was to examine how the relationships between fear appeals, used by a classroom teacher prior to a high-stakes examination, and STV and ASE differ depending on whether the fear appeal is appraised as a challenge or a threat. Relations were examined using structural equation modeling (SEM) and diagrammed in Fig. 1. In addition to the paths from challenge and threat appraisal to STV and ASE, paths were also included from fear appeals to STV and ASE to examine the possibility that there are direct paths in addition to, or instead of, indirect paths mediated by appraisals. Importantly, we control for the autoregressive, and cross-lagged, relations that might arise from prior STV and ASE.

Although not the main focus of this study, this also allows for paths from STV and ASE, as antecedents, to appraisals. Theoretically speaking STV and ASE would be expected to interact in predicting challenge and threat appraisals. Interactions, however, were not investigated in the present study. This was partly to avoid introducing additional complexity into the analytic model and partly as the main aim of this was to examine relations from fear appeals, and their appraisal, to STV and ASE. Gender and year group were included as covariates. These were not included in Fig. 1 for simplicity.

Fear appeals were examined in the context of the examinations taken at the end of secondary schooling in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland: the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Students

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