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## Review

## I can do this! The development and calibration of children's expectations for success and competence beliefs

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## ABSTRACT

We review work on the development of children and adolescents' expectancy and competence beliefs for academic achievement domains across the elementary and secondary school years, and how they become calibrated to children's performance. The work reviewed stems from prominent achievement motivation theories: expectancy-value theory, social cognitive theory, self-worth theory, and self-determination theory. Broadly, research on the development of children's expectancy and competence beliefs for different achievement tasks shows that these beliefs decline from kindergarten to 12th grade, although there are different patterns of decline. Across age children's expectancy beliefs relate more strongly to, or become better calibrated with, their performance on achievement activities. Such calibration impacts students' motivation and self-regulation for exams and other assignments. Children's expectancies are influenced by the feedback (supportive or critical) given to them by parents and teachers, as well as by parents' and teachers' expectancies for them. School instructional practices, notably ability grouping and tracking, differentially influence children's developing expectancies. Peers also impact each other's expectancy beliefs. We conclude the article with suggestions for future research.

## Introduction

The constructs of expectancies for success and broader competence beliefs have a long history in the achievement motivation field (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Weiner, 1992, 2010). Current work on expectancies and competence beliefs in the achievement motivation literature is based on the following foundational work: William James' (1890) philosophical beliefs about self-knowledge; Tolman's (1932) seminal work on how rats' expectancies (rather than just their "habits") guided their actions in mazes when they were seeking rewards; Rotter's (1954, 1966) work on reward expectancies that generalize into broader expectancies for different achievement areas; Atkinson's (1957, 1964) theory of achievement motivation in which individuals' expectancies for success play a major role in their resultant achievement motivation; White's (1959) proposition that many organisms have a basic need to develop their competencies; Heider (1958) and Weiner's (1985) focus on how individuals' explanations for outcomes influence their expectations for performance on similar upcoming tasks; and Bandura's (1977) proposal that individuals' self-efficacy, or beliefs about capabilities to complete actions, have a strong impact on motivation, persistence, and performance.

We begin the article with definitions of expectancy-related beliefs (i.e., expectancies and competence beliefs) from current motivation theories: expectancy-value theory, social cognitive theory, self-concept and self-worth theories, and self-determination

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theory. We next describe how children's expectancy-related belief develop, both the normative pattern frequently discussed, and different trajectories in them that have more recently been discovered. We then turn to relations of expectancies and competence beliefs to performance, and their calibration to performance. Then we discuss various social and environmental factors impacting children's expectancy-related beliefs, and recent interventions to improve them. Throughout we note gender differences in expectancy-related beliefs, an important focus in research on these beliefs.

## Defining expectancies for success and competence-related beliefs

### *Expectancies and competence beliefs in expectancy-value theory*

Atkinson (1957, 1964) developed an expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation to explain different achievement-related behaviors, such as striving for success, choice among achievement tasks, and persistence. He was influenced by Murray's (1938) view that the need for achievement is a basic human need, Lewin's (1938) notion of activity valence, and Tolman's (1932) expectancies for success construct. Atkinson postulated that individuals' achievement behaviors are determined by achievement motives, expectancies for success, and incentive values, and expressed the relations among these constructs in algebraic form. He discussed expectancies or probabilities of success at the task-specific level, and stated that they could range from zero to one. One interesting conclusion Atkinson made from algebraic manipulations of the terms in the mathematical expression of his model is that individuals' motivation to approach success was highest when their expectancy for success was 0.50 (see Eccles et al., 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992 for discussion and critique).

Eccles (Parsons) et al. (1983) developed and tested an expectancy-value (EV) model of achievement-related choices that built in part on Atkinson's (1957) work but expanded and changed it in fundamental ways; see Eccles (2005), Wigfield and Eccles (2000), and Wigfield, Tonks, and Klauda (2016) for detailed presentations of the model. Eccles and her colleagues focus on the social psychological influences on individuals' choice and persistence at different achievement activities. They view individuals' choices as influenced by negative and positive task characteristics and many other factors. A major theme in their work is individual and gender differences in decisions regarding activity choice.

Eccles (Parsons) et al. (1983) defined *expectancies for success* as children's beliefs about how well they will do on upcoming tasks, either in the immediate or longer-term future. They defined *beliefs about competence or ability* as children's evaluations of their competence in different areas and measure them with respect to individuals' beliefs about how good they are at a certain activity, how good they are relative to other individuals, and how good they are relative to their performance on other activities; we discuss their measure below. Although they distinguished expectancies and competence beliefs theoretically, their empirical work shows that children and adolescents do not distinguish between them (e.g., Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993). Eccles and her colleagues have found that children's expectancy-related beliefs have direct effects on their subsequent performance and indirect effects on their intentions to continue activities and choices of doing so.

### *Bandura's social cognitive theory*

In his social cognitive theory Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) emphasized human agency and perceptions of efficacy (defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to organize and execute a given course of action to solve a problem or accomplish a task) as major determinants of individuals' achievement strivings. He characterized self-efficacy as a multidimensional construct that can vary in strength (i.e., low to high), generality (relating to many situations or only a few), and level of difficulty (feeling efficacious for all tasks or only easy tasks). Self-efficacy often is measured by asking individuals how confident they are that they can accomplish a given task (Pajares, 1996); we discuss its measurement further in the next section.

Bandura (1977) distinguished between two kinds of expectancy beliefs: Outcome expectations, beliefs that certain behaviors (like practice) will lead to certain outcomes (like improved performance); and efficacy expectations, beliefs about whether one can perform the behaviors necessary to produce the outcome. Individuals can believe that certain behaviors will produce outcomes (outcome expectation), but may not believe they can do that behavior (efficacy expectation).

Bandura (1997) proposed that individuals' efficacy expectations are the major determinant of goal setting, activity choice, willingness to expend effort, and persistence. He also proposed that individuals' perceived self-efficacy is determined by four things: Previous performance (succeeding leads to a stronger sense of personal efficacy); vicarious learning (watching others succeed or fail on tasks); verbal encouragement by others; and one's physiological reactions (over arousal and anxiety/worry lower efficacy).

### *Self-concept and self-worth theories*

A complete review of the research on self-concept (defined in terms of competence beliefs) and self-worth (defined as one's overall sense that one has value as a person, or not) is beyond our scope (see Byrne, 1996; Covington, 2009; Harter, 1990, 2006; Marsh, Martin, Yeung, & Craven, 2017). However, work on these topics is relevant to this article because much work on self-concept—motivated by foundational work from Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976)—focuses on and measures self-concept as perceived competence in different academic areas. Like motivation theorists, self-concept researchers study the relations of self-concepts of ability to performance on different activities, often showing that relations between self-concept and achievement are reciprocal (see Marsh et al., 2017, for review). This line of work also explores internal/external frame of reference effects, in which the domain specificity of self-concept is emphasized; that is, achievement in one domain (such as math) leads to higher math self-

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