



Understanding the academic motivations of students with a history of reading difficulty: An expectancy-value-cost approach



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ABSTRACT

We examined the academic self-efficacy, positive subjective task values, and perceived effort cost of first-year undergraduates with ($n = 168$) and without ($n = 314$) a self-reported history of reading difficulty, and further their relations with academic achievement and satisfaction. Students with a self-reported history of reading difficulty described lower academic self-efficacy, earned lower grades, and accrued fewer credits. The groups did not differ significantly in their positive task values, effort cost, academic satisfaction, or institutional retention. Path analyses indicated that for both groups, academic self-efficacy and effort cost were predictive of first-year academic performance while intrinsic value was predictive of academic satisfaction and institutional retention. Multi-group analyses indicated a significant group difference: academic self-efficacy explained unique variance in academic satisfaction for students without a self-reported history of reading difficulty, but not for those who reported such a history. We discuss implications of the relations between difficulties in reading acquisition and motivations.

1. Introduction

The academic transition from high school to university is challenging for many types of students, but particularly so for students with learning difficulties (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Madaus, 2005). One group that is academically vulnerable during this transition is university students with a history of reading difficulty. While these students achieve academic standing sufficient for admission to university, they tend to have below-average reading abilities (Deacon, Cook, & Parrila, 2012). As a result, they experience greater academic difficulty at university and may face above-average risk of dropping out (Bergey, Deacon, & Parrila, 2017; Chevalier, Parrila, Ritchie, & Deacon, 2017). Among general university populations, motivational factors have been found to have strong influences on academic outcomes (Schneider & Preckel, 2017), though little is known about the academic motivations of students with a history of reading difficulty. In the current study, we examine these motivations through the lens of expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983), which posits that motivation for academic tasks is driven by expectations for success (e.g., Will I be successful?) and the perceived value for the task (e.g., Do I care?). We investigate whether students who self-report a history of reading difficulties differ from students with no such history in academic self-efficacy and subjective

task values for obtaining a university degree. We also examine how these motivational perceptions are associated with first-year academic performance, academic satisfaction, and institutional retention for students with and without a self-reported history of reading difficulty. Understanding how motivational perceptions are linked to academic outcomes for students with a history of reading difficulties illuminates how universities can support the academic success of this at-risk population.

1.1. Expectancy-value theory

Expectancy-value theory offers a broad theoretical framework for understanding the development of motivation and its influence on choices, persistence, and achievement in academic settings. Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) developed the most prominent recent articulation of expectancy-value theory for academic contexts. According to Eccles et al., motivation is a function of one's expectation for success and values for a task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). When individuals perceive themselves to be capable of a task and expect to be successful, they are more likely to choose to engage in it, persist at it longer, and achieve better outcomes. Subjective task values refer to the extent to which an individual

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cares about or values the task at hand. Within the Eccles et al.'s model, subjective task values are comprised of four interrelated values: intrinsic value, utility value, attainment value, and cost. Intrinsic value refers to the enjoyment experienced while engaging in the task. Utility value refers to how useful the task is for reaching immediate and future goals. Attainment value refers to the extent to which the task is deemed important to individual identity. Cost refers to what is suffered or given up as a result of engaging in the task (Eccles, 2009; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004). Intrinsic, utility and attainment values are theorized to motivate task initiation and persistence while costs exert the opposite influence.

Self-efficacy is the belief that one can organize and execute actions to achieve designated results (Bandura, 1997). Applied to educational contexts, academic self-efficacy refers to the belief that one can accomplish academic tasks at designated levels (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1991). Individuals who believe they are capable of success in a task are more likely to initiate and persist at a challenging task. Academic self-efficacy is a type of expectancy belief and is closely related to the construct of expectancy for success, which Eccles et al. defined as the belief in how well one will perform on future tasks (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The construct of academic self-efficacy is grounded in social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) rather than expectancy-value theory; nevertheless, academic self-efficacy and expectancy for success share substantial conceptual overlap and may be empirically indistinguishable, especially when the task is operationalized broadly (Bong, 2001; Pajares, 1996; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), as it is in the current study.

1.2. Associations between academic self-efficacy, subjective task values, academic performance and persistence

A compelling body of research has demonstrated that expectancy beliefs, such as academic self-efficacy, and subjective task values are correlates of academic performance and persistence in post-secondary education settings. Students who report high levels of self-efficacy are more willing to initiate and persist at challenging tasks, are more likely to achieve higher academic performance, and express greater intentions to persist in a program of study than are students who report low self-efficacy (Bong, 2001; Devonport & Lane, 2006; Klassen & Usher, 2010; Pajares, 1996). A recent review of meta-analytic studies examining correlates of achievement in higher education found that academic self-efficacy demonstrated consistently large effects on achievement (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). In an earlier meta-analysis, Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) found that self-efficacy explained 14% of variance in academic performance and 12% of variance in persistence; ability level and age were significant moderators, with larger effects found for high school and college students (vs. younger students) and larger effects for students with low academic performance (vs. students with normative academic performance).

The subjective task values held by university students have been found to be positively associated with academic performance and the intention to persist in programs of study and the intention to persist at university (Bong, 2001; Neuville et al., 2007; Perez, Cromley, & Kaplan, 2014). When both expectancy beliefs and task values are examined simultaneously, expectancy beliefs tend to be the strongest predictors of performance while subjective task values tend to be the strongest predictors of task choice (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Although the construct of effort cost has received less empirical attention, research suggests that costs can be important negative predictors of academic choices, such as the intention to choose or persist in a major (Battle & Wigfield, 2003; Perez et al., 2014).

1.3. Associations between academic self-efficacy, subjective task values and academic satisfaction

Academic satisfaction refers to the perceived enjoyment and

fulfillment in the role or experiences of being a student. There has been a growing interest in academic satisfaction as an important outcome in educational experiences (e.g., Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015; Lent, 2004; Ojeda, Flores, & Navarro, 2011; Sheu, Mejia, Rigali-Oiler, Primé, & Chong, 2016). This trend follows the long-standing attention that job satisfaction has received in motivational research in employment settings. Lent and colleagues (Lent et al., 2005; Lent, Singley, Sheu, Schmidt, & Schmidt, 2007) have identified self-efficacy and interest as positive predictors of academic satisfaction. Satisfaction has also been found to be shaped by acting in alignment with personal values and goals (Ryan & Deci, 2001) and therefore tasks that are perceived to be personally relevant, aligned with life goals, and important to one's sense of self are likely to support satisfaction perceptions.

1.4. Associations between motivational beliefs and retention via academic performance and satisfaction

In a seminal paper on student departure from higher education and in subsequent work, Tinto (1975, 2007) developed a sociological model of the decision to drop out of college. The model posits that the decision to leave university prior to graduation is ultimately influenced by the extent to which an individual is integrated into the academic and social systems within an institution. The aspect of Tinto's theory that is most relevant to questions taken up by the current study relate to academic integration. According to Tinto's model, being and feeling academically integrated is the product of a student's academic performance, such as grades or credit accrual, and his or her intellectual development. The model suggests that students whose academic performance and intellectual development aligns with normative standards in the university will feel more academically integrated and satisfied, and be less likely to depart prematurely. Empirical studies have supported predictions from Tinto's model. Low grades and failing courses are indicators of the decision to leave university (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). Students who feel satisfied with or integrated into academic life have been found to be more likely to be engaged during learning (Wefald & Downey, 2009) and more likely to be retained (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004; Starr, Betz, & Menne, 1972; Tinto, 1993, 2007). A similar pattern has been found for students with learning difficulties, with academic integration explaining unique variance in the intention to persist at university among first- and second-year university students with learning disabilities (DeDeppo, 2009).

While Tinto's (1975) model does not explicitly address the role of motivational beliefs, Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) expanded on Tinto's model to focus on the psychological processes that lead to institutional integration. In their psychological model of retention, Bean and Eaton posited that motivational beliefs such as self-efficacy were proximal psychological predictors of academic performance and integration. Rodgers and Summers (2008) have further expanded Bean and Eaton's model to include subjective values. Taken together, these models suggest that academic self-efficacy and subjective task values are associated with academic satisfaction and performance (e.g., accruing credits), and in turn, the decision to re-enroll in university, though to our knowledge these indirect relations have not been empirically tested.

1.5. Reading skills and academic achievement of students with a self-reported history of reading difficulty

Children who struggle in the acquisition of reading skills typically continue to experience reading difficulties into adulthood (Lefly & Pennington, 1991). Some of these individuals learn to compensate for their reading difficulties to the point of earning admission to university (Parrila, Georgiou, & Corkett, 2007). Since many individuals who have early reading or learning difficulty do not receive a diagnosis of a learning disability (e.g., Brown, 2013; Kaplan & Shachter, 1991;

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