



# Adults' learning motivation: Expectancy of success, value, and the role of affective memories<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The present study tested the applicability of expectancy-value theory to adults' learning motivation. Motivation was measured as the anticipated reaction (AR) of German students (N = 300) to receiving their instructions in English as a new learning opportunity. We used structural equation modeling to test our hypotheses. Expectancies of success and values from school predicted current expectancy and value, which, in turn, accounted for about 64% of variance in AR. In addition, we explicitly tested the hitherto neglected role of affective memories as a major precursor of value, expectancy of success, and AR. Results show a small direct effect of only negative affective memories on AR, leading to a significant incremental prediction of AR in addition to expectancy and value. Thus, motivation and experiences at secondary school appear to play a crucial role in adults' learning motivation, mediated by expectancy and value specific to the learning opportunity.

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## 1. Introduction

Educational psychology rarely focuses on adult learning. However, adult learning is gaining more and more importance due to current societal developments (e.g., the call for life-long-learning, OECD, 2005). Adults' learning motivation can be viewed as a necessary prerequisite for adult learning (Courtney, 1992; Włodkowski, 2008). In order to promote adult learning, it is important to know more about the motivational factors that influence the decision to access a learning opportunity.

Theoretical models from adult education research propose expectancy-value approaches to explain adults' learning motivation (i.e., participation in adult education; Courtney, 1992; Schmidt, 2009). Also, empirical research on participation in non-mandatory professional development and training activities draws on self-efficacy (i.e., expectancy of success) and attitude (i.e., value; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Tharenou, 2001). Thus, we suggest that expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) can be applied to explain adults' motivation to utilize a learning opportunity. According to this theory (Eccles, 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002), learning motivation can be viewed as

a function of expectancy of success (i.e., "Can I pass the course?") and a subjective value of the task or learning opportunity (i.e., "Do I want to take the course and why?"). These two basic factors are themselves influenced by a variety of preceding factors, in particular, socializing agents, psychological characteristics, individual beliefs, and *affective memories* (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; later *affective reactions and memories*, Eccles, 2005).

In this paper, we applied expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, 2002) to help explain adult students' motivation to use a new learning opportunity. Specifically, adult students at a German university were asked to rate their acceptance of and intended engagement in courses with English as a medium of instruction. Since previous education is the best predictor of participation in further education (Kuwan & Thebis, 2005; OECD, 2005) we conceptualized previous expectancies and values (i.e., learning motivation) developed in secondary school as antecedents of adults' learning motivation. Moreover, we included a measure of emotions associated with prior experience, which is considered to be a central aspect of adult learning (e.g., Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, 1994) and expectancy-value theory (i.e., affective memories; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Thus, our study was designed (1) to test the applicability of expectancy-value theory to adults' learning motivation using an undergraduate sample and (2) to extend empirical research on expectancy-value theory by exploring the role of affective memories as antecedent of learning motivation.

### 1.1. Adults' learning motivation

It is difficult to arrive at a general, and yet, specific definition of adult learners (cf. Brookfield, 1995; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner,

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2007; OECD, 2003). From an institutional perspective, “the key information for definitional purposes [is] whether or not a person is returning to learning or is still in the initial system” (OECD, 2003, p. 23). From an individual learner’s perspective, adult learners are supposed to be more *internally motivated* and *problem-oriented* (Knowles et al., 2005), as well as more *self-directed* (Straka, 2000) than children and adolescents. However, approaches claiming that the way adults learn can be distinguished from childhood learning have been heavily criticized, and none of them is accepted as presenting a theoretical framework exclusively relevant to adult learning (Brookfield, 1995). As Norman (1999) points out, there is no transformation of people into adult learners once they enter an adult learning program. In fact, many of the characteristics attributed to adult learners (e.g., self-directed learning, problem-orientation) develop with age and life experience, and already exist in students at school and in higher education.

Our working definition of adult learners, therefore, draws on these theoretical frameworks, but is limited to the least common denominator: Adult learners are people who have finished compulsory schooling, are in educational settings which support and demand self-directed learning, and decide about the extent (i.e., whether they engage more or less, or not at all) and the direction (i.e., referring to course choice) of their engagement in education.

Following this definition, undergraduate students represent adult learners in several aspects: They participate in an educational setting which supports and demands self-directed learning, they have chosen their degree program, and they are responsible for their engagement in learning activities. While choosing between one of a range of major subjects is not exactly a typical decision for adult learners, having to decide about an educational offer beyond the degree program resembles adult learning. In this case, college students have to evaluate costs and benefits, resulting in more or less motivation to use this learning opportunity, and have to make a decision, just as adults returning to a learning situation.

### 1.2. Applying expectancy-value theory to adults’ learning motivation

Eccles’ expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000, 2002) was developed to explain school children’s achievement and course choices, emphasizing the influence of family and teachers as socializing agents. However, we argue that this theory might also be fruitful in explaining adults’ learning motivation, even though somewhat differently compared to school children’s motivation. Adults are more self-determined than children (i.e., the influence of socializing agents is weaker) and have completed much of their physiological, psychological, and educational development. Adults have already established norms, values, and self-concepts (Schwartz, 1992; see also Bardi, Lee, Hofmann-Towfigh, & Soutar, 2009, for research on value change). In a similar manner, adults’ self-concept of ability (i.e., representing expectancy of success) is developed throughout school and becomes more stable, more specific, and more closely associated to interest (i.e., representing value) and academic achievement with time, as well as with accumulated experiences (Denissen, Zarrett, & Eccles, 2007; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Overall, motivation seems to stabilize with age, and previous education leads to future participation in education (Hurtz & Williams, 2009; OECD, 2005).

We therefore assume that adults’ expectancies and values result from previous learning experiences and learning motivation. This motivation may be school-related or from other learning contexts. However, schooling covers a long and developmentally important phase of people’s lives and can be seen as a major educational experience (Roesser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Therefore, we suggest that the appraisal of a new learning opportunity is based on values already initiated at school. Even if adult learning is not a continuance of school subjects (Kuwan & Thebis, 2005), and direct experience with the new learning opportunity may not be at hand, school experience

and motivation should form the basis for adults’ learning motivation. For example, even if accounting was completely new, people would realize that it is related to maths and economics – subjects they had at school. Following this notion, to form expectancies and values with respect to new learning opportunities, adults may draw on their school experience directly or indirectly (i.e., generalizing from related school subjects in terms of a “best guess”; Doll & Ajzen, 1992). Either way, school experiences can be seen as a crucial basis for adults’ learning motivation. In particular, affectively colored experiences should be memorable (LeDoux, 1994).

### 1.3. The role of affective memories

Emotions are related to students’ academic motivation and achievement (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). They may both be reflected in the value of a learning opportunity (i.e., intrinsic value is associated with joy; Eccles, 2005) and contribute to people’s self-concept of ability (i.e., consistent negative performance feedback resulting in frustration; Weiner, 2010). Thus, they can either encourage or discourage people from engaging in a learning opportunity. Within expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) emotions related to past learning activities are labeled affective memories. Regrettably, empirical research has hitherto neglected affective memories as antecedents of expectancy and value.

Originally, Eccles (1983) conceptualized “affective experiences” (p. 96), drawing from causal attribution (Weiner, 1972) and individual differences in anxiety (i.e., test anxiety). Later on, affective memories have been designed as a comprehensive factor consolidating the influence of socializing agents and the individual’s interpretation of previous experience (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Expectancy-value theory assigns affective memories a prominent place as the most proximal predictor of task value (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). However, precursors of affective memories are indirectly related to expectancy of success (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

Overall, affective memories should influence people’s self-concept of ability (e.g., based on attribution theory; Weiner, 2010) and contribute to task values stimulated by socializing agents and previous experiences (e.g., because a task-related activity was joyful and interesting; Simpkins, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006). However, while Eccles and her colleagues provide substantial findings for many of the model components, the role of affective experiences has not been explicitly addressed, and, indeed, is not discussed further in the study (for a summary of research on expectancy-value theory see Eccles, 2005; Jacobs & Eccles, 2000).

Recently, Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) interpreted affective memories as single affect-laden episodes that are remembered years later, and still influence perceptions and behavior. They suggest that these memories “can be activated by anticipation of engagement in the task and can lead to different positive or negative values for the activity through conditioning or direct association” (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 53). That is, Schunk and his colleagues do not assume attributional processes to be responsible for the effect of affective memories. Instead, they refer to learned values and allow for both direct and indirect (e.g., mediated by task value) effects on learning motivation.

Still another conceptualization of affective memories focuses on personal event memories that influence people’s life course, such as occupational or educational choices (Pillemer, 1998, 2001; Pillemer, Picariello, Law, & Reichman, 1996). These momentous events are remembered vividly and “continue to influence, inspire, and sustain actions and beliefs long after the original occurrence of the momentous events that they represent” (Pillemer, 2001, p. 124), for better or for worse. Momentous events can be interpreted as expectancy- or value-constituent factors in education (e.g., if a student suddenly realizes how mathematics help in daily routine). Thus, they can contribute to, or even represent affective memories.

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