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The role of social comparison in students' perceptions of ability: An enriched view of academic motivation in middle school students

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Abstract

This study addressed notions derived from a model by Tesser, Campbell, and Smith (1984) of self-concept and how it is influenced by social relationships. We were interested in whether the self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM) would allow us to investigate more directly the value component in expectancy–value models of achievement motivation. Using distinctions often made about different motivational orientations, we discovered a three-way interaction between level of mastery orientation (high or low), relevance of math (high or low), and target of rating (self or 7th grade friend) on students' perception of ability in math. Thus, the SEM model was supported but only for students reporting a low mastery orientation. For them, those who reported math as highly relevant estimated their own ability as significantly higher than their friend's, whereas those reporting math as less relevant showed no difference in estimates of ability between self or friend. For high mastery oriented students, no differences were found.

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1. Introduction

Parents and educators often express concerns about the real and apparent lack of interest and intrinsic motivation for academic endeavors that children demonstrate,

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particularly as they make the transition from elementary to middle school grades. Explanations of such a lack of interest in school learning run to several sources but often, the role of social influence and social comparison comes into the picture (Berndt & Keefe, 1996). In this view, schooling is a context in which children are easily made aware of how they and others perform, of how important performance is as opposed to learning, and these concerns with performance have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation. One potential source of explanation of this social comparison phenomenon is a model developed in the social psychology literature that relates social comparison to academic performance. Tesser and Smith (1980) proposed a model of how individuals maintain their self-view by evaluating the importance they place on their own performance and ability in particular domains relative to their peers' performance and ability. Thus, in our study we were interested in whether students' academic motivation orientation would mitigate the effects of processes by which this self-evaluation takes place.

Specifically, we speculated that the claims of the SEM model may not apply to students who are high in mastery/learning orientation because for them, the accomplishments of others are not relevant to what propels them to achieve their academic goals. The claims of the SEM model that relate to how one perceives how others are performing on a task would seem to apply to students whose academic motivation is based on comparisons of self to others, what is at the heart of different kinds of performance orientations.

1.1. The self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model

In order to summarize how one's perceptions of peers' and strangers' performance in a particular domain influence one's self-evaluation, Tesser and Smith (1980) proposed a model, named the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model, that has proved generative in the social psychological literature but has not been associated with the prolific educational psychology literature on academic achievement motivation. The model describes a dilemma faced by friends when they consider their performance in a particular domain, the relevance of that domain to their self-concept (by which Tesser and colleagues meant how individuals view themselves), and their closeness to each other. For example, a student who perceives that she is performing better than others in a particular academic domain that is relevant to her will likely pursue friendships only with those whom she perceives as less able than she is in that domain. Or, from a different perspective, a student may decide that a close friend is much better than he is in an academic domain and as a result, decrease the relative importance of that domain and his motivation to engage in academic activities.

The SEM model has been investigated in conjunction with several other psychological constructs, including physiological arousal (Achee, Tesser, & Pilkington, 1994), jealousy (DeSteno & Slovey, 1996), narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993), and social identity. Tesser and colleagues have applied the SEM model to the cognitive processes of students in an educational context. Students frequently experience situations in which one or more aspects of school are highly relevant to their sense of self and typically experience psychological closeness with classmates or friends.

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