



Experiencing fear appeals as a challenge or a threat influences attainment value and academic self-efficacy



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ABSTRACT

Fear appeals are persuasive messages that highlight the negative consequences of a particular course of action. Studies have shown that attainment value and academic self-efficacy predict how fear appeals are appraised. In this study we examined how the appraisal of fear appeals might also influence subsequent attainment value and academic self-efficacy. Self-report data were collected from 1433 students in their final two years of secondary education over three waves. Findings revealed that when students saw fear appeals as a challenge attainment value and academic self-efficacy were higher. When students saw fear appeals as a threat, attainment value and academic self-efficacy were lower. These results highlight the functional importance of how fear appeals are appraised. Challenge and threat appraisals were not mere by products of attainment value or academic self-efficacy but impacted on attainment value and academic self-efficacy; variables that are likely to make a critical impact on educational progress and attainment. We conclude that initial teacher education and teacher professional development programs would benefit from enhanced interpersonal and relational-skills training to enable teachers to judge more effectively how fear appeals are appraised.

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1. Introduction

This study examines how academic self-efficacy and attainment value relate to the appraisal of fear appeals used by secondary school teachers prior to a high-stakes examination. Fear appeals are used by teachers as a motivational strategy; a ‘scare tactic’ to attempt to persuade and encourage their students to work hard and prepare thoroughly for forthcoming examinations (Putwain, 2009; Putwain & Roberts, 2009). Although these messages may be used with the intention to benefit students, evidence suggests that the use of fear appeals may not always have the desired effect. When appraised as threatening fear appeals result in higher test anxiety, lower motivation, and lower grades (e.g., Putwain & Remedios, 2014a; Putwain & Symes, 2011a, 2011b). However, fear appeals can be appraised as challenging as well as threatening. For example, when attainment value and academic self-efficacy are high,

students perceive fear appeals as challenging (Putwain, Remedios, & Symes, 2014; Putwain & Symes, 2014). This finding begs a question about directionality. If attainment value and academic self-efficacy influence the appraisal of fear appeals, does the appraisal of fear appeals also have an impact on attainment value and academic self-efficacy? This study sets out to answer this question in a longitudinal design by examining whether the appraisal of fear appeals predicts subsequent academic self-efficacy and attainment value over and above the variance explained by prior academic self-efficacy and attainment value.

1.1. Fear appeals: persuasive messages designed to elicit adaptive threat

Fear appeals are persuasive communications that draw attention to the negative and unwanted consequences of a particular course of action in order to elicit a change in behaviour to avoid those consequences (e.g., Ruiter, Abraham, & Kok, 2001; Smerecnik & Ruiter, 2010). Fear Appeals have been researched most often in the health literature to examine the effectiveness of messages designed to promote, for example, smoking cessation, safe sex

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practices, and self-examination for breast and testicular cancer (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Cismaru, Nagpal, & Krishnamurthy, 2009; Feng & Burlison, 2008; Umphrey, 2004). The extended-parallel process model (Popova, 2012; Witte & Allen, 2000) proposes that the success of fear appeals to change behaviour depends on the beliefs about the likelihood and severity of the negative outcome, whether an alternative course of action is likely to avoid that negative outcome (response efficacy) and whether the message recipient believes that they are capable of performing the alternative course(s) of action (self-efficacy). Meta-analyses based on the health literature have supported these predictions. The evidence suggests that fear appeals will be most successful in changing behaviour when the perceived threat is high (the negative outcome is believed to be likely and severe) and when response and self-efficacy are also high (Maloney, Lapinski, & Witte, 2011; Peters, Ruiter, & Kok, 2013).

1.2. Fear appeals in the classroom

A nascent body of work shows that fear appeals are not limited to the health context but are communicated by teachers to their students, prior to high-stakes examinations. For instance, Putwain and Roberts (2012) surveyed 234 secondary school teachers about their use of language prior to high-stakes examinations. Of those teachers surveyed, 81.6% agreed or strongly agreed that students should be reminded that failure would result from inadequate preparation and 67.5% agreed or strongly agreed that students should be told that failure would prevent further study in post-compulsory education. When used in an educational or instructional context prior to high-stakes examinations, Putwain and Symes (2014) define fear appeals as "... messages used by teachers (or other school staff, such as managers) to: (a) elicit fear through highlighting the negative consequences of failure along with (b), those courses of action are likely to increase the threat of failure and/or (c), how the threat of failure can be avoided by adopting an alternative course of action" (pp. 230–231).

One might reasonably ask, what does it matter if teachers use fear appeals prior to high-stakes examinations, or if students appraise them in different ways? When appraised as threatening, fear appeals result in higher test anxiety, a higher performance-avoidance goal (to avoid performing worse than one's classmates), lower intrinsic motivation, and lower grades on tests and examinations (Putwain & Best, 2011, 2012; Putwain & Roberts, 2009; Putwain & Remedios, 2014b; Putwain & Symes, 2011a, 2011b; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006). These findings are broadly consistent with those from adjacent areas of the educational psychology literature. For example, the use of threats, deadlines, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals (see Reeve, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000) are associated with reduced engagement and increased learning-related anger and anxiety (Assor & Kaplan, 2001; Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005). Coercive practices that threaten students with punishment and guilt are associated with a decrease in positive learning-related affect, motivation, and cognitive learning (Mainhard, Brenkelmans, & Wubbels, 2011).

1.3. Fear appeals in the classroom: how are they appraised?

Putwain and Symes (2014) propose that fear appeals are appraised on the basis of the personal relevance (primary appraisal) and on the resources or options available for responding to that event (secondary appraisal). A challenge appraisal occurs when the fear appeal is judged as being relevant and the student believes that they can respond effectively to the demands posed in the message. A challenge appraisal will be accompanied by positive

emotions (e.g., hope) and result in favourable outcomes (e.g., academic engagement). On the other hand, a threat appraisal occurs when the demands of a personally relevant message are believed to outweigh one's ability to respond effectively. A threat appraisal will be accompanied by negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) and result in unfavourable outcomes (e.g., academic disaffection). To examine these claims, research into the appraisal of classroom fear appeals has drawn upon expectancy-value theory (EVT) and control-value theory (CVT) to explain how students judge relevance and response options.

EVT is a theory of academic motivation that proposes achievement-related choices and performance arise from the interaction of task values with the expectancy of success (Eccles, 2007; Eccles, O'Neill, & Wigfield, 2005; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009). CVT is a theory of learning and assessment-related emotions (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; Pekrun & Perry, 2014). In CVT, discrete emotions (e.g., enjoyment or boredom) arise from differing combinations of control and value appraisals of learning activities or outcomes. Studies have confirmed that relevance is established through attainment value and response options through academic self-efficacy (Putwain & Remedios, 2014a; Putwain et al., 2014; Putwain & Symes, 2014).

Attainment value refers to the perceived importance of performance on a particular task or the importance of grade in a school subject to one's sense of self-identity (Eccles et al., 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Wigfield et al., 2009). Attainment value can be differentiated from intrinsic value, concerned with task interest and enjoyment, and utility value, where the task is instrumental in achieving an outcome separate from the task itself (e.g., a career goal). In EVT subjective task values are proposed to influence academic engagement and choice. A student would be more likely to choose to engage in a particular task when task participation or performance is seen as central to his or her own sense of themselves (Eccles, 2005, 2007).

Academic self-efficacy refers to the belief that one is capable of learning or performing those actions required to succeed at a particular task (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). These beliefs are domain-specific and arise from differing combinations of mastery experience, feedback from others, attributions of task performance, and differing frames of reference (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Skaalvik, 1997). Academic self-efficacy influences task-specific thought, cognition, and behaviour, and is highly predictive of task-performance (e.g., Parker, Marsh, Ciarrochi, Marshall, & Abduljabbar, 2014; Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

In EVT, beliefs about the expectation of success (conceptually aligned with academic self-efficacy – see Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) combine with subjective-task value to influence academic achievement, effort, motivation, and school dropout (e.g., Chouinard, Karsenti, & Roy, 2007; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Federici & Skaalvik, 2014; Nagengast, Marsh, Scalas, Xu, & Trautwein, 2011). In CVT, action-control expectancy (i.e., academic self-efficacy) combines with subjective values to result in specific and discrete learning, classroom and test-related emotions (Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, & Perry, 2011; Pekrun et al., 2004).

1.4. Is the appraisal of fear appeals related to subsequent attainment value and academic self-efficacy?

Cross-sectional and experimental studies using secondary school students have supported the role of attainment value and academic self-efficacy as antecedents of challenge and threat appraisal of fear appeals made prior to a high-stakes examination. A challenge appraisal follows high attainment value and high academic self-efficacy whereas a threat appraisal follows high

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