



Achievement and avoidance motivational orientations in the domain of mentoring

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Abstract

To extend research on fundamental motivational orientations into a new domain, we explored the achievement (positive) and avoidance (negative) orientations of formal organization-based mentors and protégés as joint predictors of personal learning experienced by both parties. We also examined the extent of mentoring functions provided by mentors as a hypothesized partial mediator. Regression analyses of 8-month data from 61 dyads revealed that mentors' personal learning was predicted by protégés' achievement (positive) and avoidance (negative) orientations, whereas protégés' personal learning was predicted by their own achievement orientation (positive). Although the extent of mentoring functions facilitated personal learning equally among mentors and protégés, it did not function as a mediator. Finally, mentor–protégé congruence on achievement orientation had implications for the personal learning of protégés.

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1. Introduction

Since the inception of scientific research on human nature and psychology in general, the basic dichotomy (see James, 1890; pp. 549–559) encompassing a desire to attain success (or competence) and a desire to avoid failure (or incompetence) has stood as a central framework

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for researching and understanding human motivation and behavior (Elliot, 1999; Higgins, 1997; James & Mazerolle, 2002; McClelland, 1951). In underscoring the continuing and widespread relevance of this basic framework for psychological research in the 21st century, Elliot and Thrash recently proposed that “the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is fundamental and integral to the study of affect, cognition, and behavior and that this distinction may be used as a conceptual lens through which to view the structure of personality” (2002, p. 804). The notion that approach and avoidance motivations are distinct phenomena rather than virtual opposites, as implied by Elliot and Thrash, is perhaps counterintuitive. Yet, designating them as relatively independent within the structure of personality and self-regulation stems from the neurological “go” or approach system (left hemisphere of the frontal cortex) being separate from the neurological “no go” or avoidance system (right hemisphere) (for overviews, see Carver & Scheier, 2000; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997). As a consequence of being rooted in distinct dispositional systems, approach and avoidance motivations should be at most only moderately (rather than strongly) inversely related.

Although approach and avoidance motivations have together played a central role in understanding much of human experience, research has not applied them to understanding the experiences of mentors and protégés. In this study, we incorporated these motivations by focusing specifically on achievement and avoidance orientations as propensities with unique implications for the learning experiences of individuals in mentoring relationships. In particular, we investigated in tandem the achievement and avoidance motivational orientations of mentors and protégés as predictors of personal learning experienced by both parties in a formal mentoring relationship. We also examined whether the predicted relationships between these motivational orientations and personal learning are accounted for by extent of mentoring functions provided. Finally, we explored whether mentor–protégé congruence on achievement and/or avoidance orientations had ramifications for personal learning, extent of mentoring functions provided, or both.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Frameworks for adult development designate experience, defined as purposive interaction with one’s environment, as the main medium for learning. They also highlight the importance of new or different work experiences that are especially conducive to the learning process (McCauley & Hezlett, 2001). In citing the earlier work of Kolb (1984), McCauley and Hezlett explained that the process of learning from experience has generally been conceptualized as “a learning cycle of having concrete experiences, making observations and reflecting on those experiences, forming concepts and generalizations based on those reflections, and testing those ideas in new situations” (p. 317). We suggest that achievement and avoidance motivational orientations of protégés and mentors shape not only the extent of mentoring functions provided, but also how these individuals then respond to the mentoring experiences. Responses such as thoughtful observations, insightful reflections, and the development of understanding, in the form of appropriate concepts and generalizations, would likely shape the extent to which participants learn from the relationship.

2.1. Achievement and avoidance orientations as predictors of personal learning

Achievement orientation is a desire to take on and overcome challenges (Harackiewicz & Sansone, 2000; Hough & Schneider, 1996; Kanfer & Heggestad, 1997). It embodies a

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