



Goal orientations and strong oughts: Adaptive or maladaptive forms of motivation for students with and without suspected learning disabilities?

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Abstract

The objective of the present studies was to evaluate the self-regulatory properties of strong ‘oughts’ as they relate to the academic achievement of elementary school students. Across three studies with typical elementary school students and students with learning problems, results indicated that strong oughts: (a) were associated with avoidance motivation, (b) represented an ‘ill’ motivational orientation that was linked to low achievement, (c) were associated with increases in persistence, and, (d) explained significant amounts of negative affect. It is concluded that strong oughts represent a rather immature form of motivation and should be avoided as a means of motivating elementary school students, due to the collateral increases in negative affect.

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Understanding the factors that are associated with effective or ineffective self-regulation would provide a breakthrough in student’s learning and achievement. Several theorists attempted to understand the factors that lead to engagement and regulation but, so far, little attention has been paid to the emotional concomitants of learning. As [Turner, Thorpe, and Meyer \(1998\)](#) pointed out, student’s emotional regulation may be the key to successful academic regulation. What are, then, the emotional attributes associated with effective or ineffective student engagement and regulation of their behavior?

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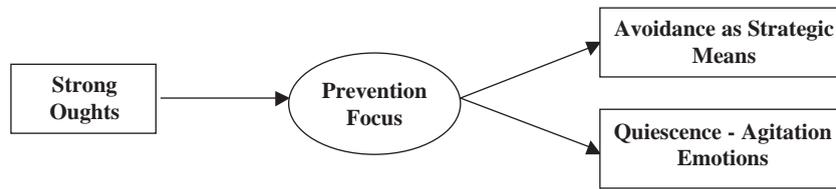


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of regulatory focus from Higgins (1997). Only focal variables are included in the figure.

Particularly in the elementary school setting, students often perceive activities as ‘low-satisfaction’, in that some academic tasks are associated with little positive affect. Regardless, students *have to engage* in those activities and learn material in subject matters they find uninteresting, discrepant from their future goals, and boring. Such activities, considered ‘oughts’ or ‘shoulds’, are often times different across students but are, nevertheless, present. One important question that arises, is: “how do students regulate their behavior in activities they feel *obliged to engage* and in the absence of interest and satisfaction?” Another central question is “what are the emotional concomitants of that engagement and how do these emotions relate to student engagement?” A third question is: “what are the academic outcomes from being engaged out of obligation?” The present studies were designed to provide answers to all three questions by examining student’s academic and emotional regulation when engaged in activities they considered as ‘shoulds’.

1. The ought-self in self-discrepancy theory

The concepts of obligations, the ought-self, or ‘shoulds’ are described interchangeably in two influential social psychology theories, self-discrepancy and self-determination. Self-discrepancy theory originates in the works of Higgins (1987, 1996) and his colleagues by classifying students as promotion or prevention focus. The primary thesis of self-discrepancy theory is that strong ideals and strong oughts¹ reveal themselves with distinct regulatory systems. Strong ideals represent hopes, wishes, and ambitions whereas strong oughts represent duties, obligations, and responsibilities. Furthermore, self-regulation that is based on strong ideals represents “*promotion*” regulation (i.e., the motivation to achieve desired end states), whereas strong oughts are associated with “*prevention*” regulation in that individuals focus mostly on avoiding negative outcomes.

Higgins (1997) added that feelings of obligation in ‘*ought*’ individuals, result in a prevention regulatory system that has its basis on avoiding failure (see Fig. 1). Carver, Lawrence, and Scheier (1999) stated that the self-regulatory system that has its basis on obligations partially stems from punishment. That is, a person with strong oughts tries to avoid aversive experiences in order to experience approval rather than disapproval from others. The basis of the ‘ought-self’ is to achieve a desired state and avoid an undesired one. One of those motives the approach or the avoidance is responsible for the experience of apprehension. Thus, strong oughts should relate negatively to positive affectivity and positively to task avoidance, performance-avoidance, and negative affectivity.

Weisz (1998) added that prevention regulation occurs when individuals repeatedly fail to live up to perceived obligations. Repeated failure to perform according to own or other’s expectations can result in an

¹ The terms ‘ought-self’, ‘oughts’, ‘shoulds’, ‘obligations’, and ‘ought-self guides’ have been used interchangeably and conceptually refer to the same underlying dimension, that is, goals that have their basis on obligation (cf. Boldero & Francis, 1999).

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