

Who am I and what can I achieve?

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Once upon a time there was a working class-girl who started life in a council flat with no books or educational role models. She ended up doing a doctorate at Oxford. How have her achievements shaped her and made her who she is? What opportunities did A-levels provide en route? How have your own educational choices determined your life path, your motivation? Did your background determine the values you placed upon your A-levels?

Not only are these interesting questions for all of us to reflect upon personally, but links between educational assessment, identity and motivation should also be of interest to us as psychologists. We are only too aware of the links between educational outcomes and psychological health. Therefore the role played by psychological and social influences on achievement behaviour in A-level students is important to understand because it helps identify the individual differences in motivational factors that contribute to achievement. It also provides insight into the sociocultural factors underlying differences in the behavioural choice and differential achievement of these students. This is especially important to consider as the current A-level system faces reform and the age of compulsory schooling is

raised to 18. These questions link educational assessment with motivation and identity, spanning a wide range of disciplines. Reflection upon these issues can also help us understand who we are, how we got there and who we might go on to become.

Achievement motivation

Eccles' expectancy-value model of achievement motivation (Eccles et al., 1983; Figure 1) assumes that students' beliefs about their ability and expectations for success are the strongest predictors of grades (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). It also

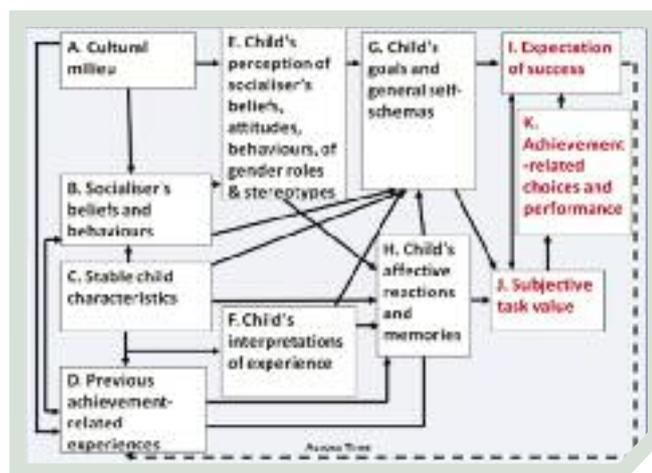


Figure 1. The expectancy-value model (adapted from Eccles et al., 1983)

suggests that gender differences in task value – the quality of the task that contributes to the increasing or decreasing probability that an individual selects it – underlie gender differences in role choice behaviour and achievement (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Parental and family characteristics are also important, providing an indirect link between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes (Eccles, 1992).

But how do these factors link who we are to what we achieve? My research seeks to answer that very question.

Identity

Identity is a complex concept, a powerful construct that guides life paths and decisions (Kroger, 2007) and allows people to draw strength from their affiliation with social groups (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). But what is the relationship between identity and A-levels?

We know that the identities of individuals and groups are formed and transformed in schools, colleges and universities (Vincent, 2003). Assessment is a big part of this, shaping how societies, groups and individuals understand themselves, creating our identity as learners and impacting directly on how and what we learn (Stobart, 1998). But still little research tells us how this relates to A-level students.

In a series of longitudinal studies Pollard and Filer (1996, 2000) established that children develop their identities as learners through successive experiences as they move through school, and that they actively negotiate their way so that education involves becoming a person as well as acquiring skills and knowledge.

They argue that assessments are simply social processes and that the results of assessments take

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their meaning for individuals from social and cultural processes of interpretation, and through mediation by others. Assessments therefore play a role in the development of personal identities and narratives. Since adolescence is a key time when identities begin to take shape, this has implications for students' competence and motivation, and the decisions about what to do with their lives (Wigfield & Wagner, 2007).

Developmental perspectives on identity focus on the psychodynamic theories offered by Erikson (1963) and Marcia (1966), who suggested that progression through genetically determined psychosocial crises or stages in adolescence lead to identity formation. Links between assessment and an individual's identity may be established as A-levels encourage reflection upon values, goals and perceived possibilities in this critical adolescent period where assessment is a substantial feature of schooling.

Social perspectives (social identity theory and self-categorisation) are concerned with the processes that surround the way people define themselves as members of a social group (Reicher et al., 2010). Social identity theory examines intergroup behaviour, focusing on competition over status and prestige and the motivation role of self-enhancement through social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), whilst self-categorisation theory examines the social identity of the group (Turner, 1987). A key factor in A-level students' expectations, values and achievement may be the maintenance of a positive social identity and maintenance of self-esteem.

The two concepts of personal and collective identities come together nicely in Eccles' notion of identity. Eccles (2009) linked her classic expectancy-value model of behavioural choice specifically to these ideas, particularly focusing on their interaction with educational settings, choices and achievements. She believed that identity involved perceptions related to skills, characteristics and competencies (the 'Me' self), and perceptions related to

personal values and goals (the 'We' self). She assumed people have both personal identities, which serve the psychological function of making one feel unique, and collective identities, which serve to strengthen ties to highly valued groups (e.g. on basis of gender, race, religion, social class, culture and family). Eccles suggested that both these self-perceptions and identities play a role in motivation by influencing expectations for success, and the importance people attach to a range of tasks and choices. Importantly, Eccles also believed that these aspects develop over the lifespan based on the social and psychological experiences individuals have as they grow up and move through adulthood; their own agency in interpreting and creating social roles and experiences that reinforce, redefine or undermine identities; and the co-construction of the content, meaning and importance of various personal and social identities by the individuals themselves and others. This is the basis of my work.

Current research

My current research predicts relationships between:

- l expectations and A-level achievement;
- l expectations and subjective task value in A-level students;
- l intrinsic value, attainment value, utility value, perceived cost and A-level achievement;
- l gender and socio-economic status and the subjective task value attached to A-level achievement.

These relationships will be explored using questionnaires to collate information on family demographics, socio-economic status and social capital; the subjective values attached to A-levels using items adapted from Eccles and Wigfield's (1995) self and task perceptions questionnaire; and future educational, economic and occupational expectancies and values using items from the Michigan Study of Adult Life Transitions (Eccles et al., 1984). The main study uses an explanatory

sequential mixed methods design where 1000 students will complete the questionnaires, followed by semi-structured interviews based on purposeful sampling, to further examine the relationships between expectations, values, identity and achievement. In accordance with the extensive analyses conducted on the expectancy value model (e.g. Eccles & Wigfield, 1995), inferential analysis will use structural equation modelling.

Implications

Not only will my research test Eccles' model cross-culturally in a UK A-level context, but it has the potential to identify the psychological and sociocultural factors underlying differences in behavioural choices and differential achievement at A-level. This has some very important implications for successful outcomes and good mental health, of use for psychologists, researchers and policy makers alike (Eccles et al., 2005). An aim is to facilitate interventions that could raise the expectations and achievements of A-level students and their parents. Whilst we know that changing family income or parental educational levels may be difficult, improving young people's educational expectations and achievements (and indeed those of their parents) may be a feasible goal.

The end....

And so to finish the story of the girl. She did A-levels, found she was bright, valued the learning, believed she could do well and was motivated to succeed... at the end of three years we'll know if she did!



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