Achievement Motive Theory: Understanding the Drive for Success and Excellence

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In a world driven by competition and the pursuit of excellence, understanding what motivates individuals to achieve their goals is crucial. Achievement Motive Theory delves into the psychological factors that fuel our desire for success, offering insights into how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence our behaviors and aspirations. By exploring the nuances of achievement motivation, we can better comprehend not only our personal drives but also the broader implications for education, career development, and personal fulfillment. This article will unpack the key concepts of Achievement Motive Theory and its relevance in shaping a culture that values perseverance, ambition, and excellence.

Achievement Motive Theory

Competence is a recurring theme in human movement whether the setting is sport, exercise, or rehabilitation. From the earliest days of life, people strive to feel effective in their unfolding interactions with the environment and, throughout the lifespan, people's well-being is compromised when this need is thwarted. Despite the apparent universality of competence motivation, there are clear differences in the ways that people pursue competence. Achievement motivation theories strive to explain the processes that initiate, direct, and maintain achievement behavior. Achievement motives are relatively stable individual differences that influence people's motivation during competence pursuits. This entry defines achievement motives, provides an overview of how they develop, reviews implicit and explicit measures of motives, and summarizes documented outcomes of achievement motives.

Achievement Motives

The earliest achievement motivation theories focused on people's aspired level of behavior and the perceived utility of different behaviors as indicated by the expectancies and values that people associated with those behaviors. A key assumption underlying these approaches was that people make conscious and rational choices about their achievement behavior. Around the same time that the expectancy-value theories were emerging, personality psychologist Henry Murray proposed a system of psychological needs that included *achievement* (a need for efficiency and effectiveness) and *infavoidance* (a need to avoid humiliation and to refrain from action due to fear of failure). These needs were proposed to explain individual differences in behavior. David McClelland and colleagues in several works subsequently introduced the construct of achievement motives to account for individual differences in people's achievement behavior under similar conditions. Motives represented the strength of associations between environmental cues (e.g., competence pursuits where success or failure are possible) and learned affective responses to those cues. Given the importance of competence to the self, self-evaluative emotions such as pride and shame provided logical affective bases for these motives.

Two motives were proposed based on people's orientation toward or away from competence based incentives during competence pursuits. The *motive to approach success* (sometimes referred to as hope for success) described individual differences in people's tendency to experience anticipatory pride while engaged in a competence pursuit. The *motive to avoid failure* described individual differences in people's tendency to experience anticipatory shame while engaged in a competence pursuit. Over time, these motives have been referred to as the need for achievement and fear of failure, respectively.

The anticipatory pride and shame involved in motives are instrumental in energizing and orienting achievement behavior. For example, pride fosters persistence and heightened engagement in goal pursuit, promotes long-term achievement, stimulates interpersonal expressiveness, engages flexible social behavior, and contributes to the development of social capital over time. Shame, on the other hand, motivates withdrawal. It can promote appeasement or aggressive behaviors depending on how people regulate their shame. From an achievement motivation perspective, shame will undermine persistence and create difficulties in achieving long-term goals.

In their achievement motivation theory, McClelland et al. posited that a person's motivation is influenced by a tendency toward success and a tendency away from failure. Each of these tendencies was represented as the product of the person's perceived probability of succeeding (or failing), the value of the reward for succeeding (or the punishment for failing), and the person's motives. Thus, motives were proposed to refine basic expectancy-value predictions and elaborate on interindividual variation in behavior. Over time, the independence of *approach* and *avoidance* motivation became apparent, and the idea that approach and avoidance tendencies produced a single resultant motivation orientation was abandoned. In contemporary research, the approach and avoidance-based achievement motives are typically treated as independent predictors of motivational outcomes, and their direct effects on motivational outcomes receive more attention than their interactions with expectancies and values.

Development of Achievement Motives

Research on the development of self-evaluative emotions informs our understanding of how the two achievement motives develop. Self-evaluative emotions are a unique class of emotions because they are not present at birth and require some cognitive development before they appear. The necessary cognitive milestones include (a) the development of a sense of self (typically 15-24 months of age); (b) the internalization of rules, standards, or goals for desired behavior (typically 24-41 months of age); and (c) the evaluation of oneself in relation to those internalized rules, standards, or goals (as early as 30 months of age). If children appraise that they are complying

with the rules, standards, or goals that they internalized through socialization, they should feel proud. On the other hand, if they appraise that they are not complying with those rules, standards, or goals, and attribute that deviance to a personal flaw (as opposed to a simple behavioral error), they should feel shame. As children develop a history of experiencing pride and shame in their competence pursuits, those competence pursuits increasingly become cues for anticipatory pride and shame. This association and anticipatory affective response is the basis for achievement motives. With roots in such foundational self-evaluative processes, these motives are likely to generalize across achievement contexts and should not be domain specific.

Measuring Implicit and Explicit Motives

One major controversy in the achievement motives literature concerned the measurement operations used to assess these motives. Originally, McClelland and his colleagues adapted the Thematic Apperception Test and asked participants to view ambiguous images of people involved in competence pursuits, and to write a story about the image (e.g., What is happening? What happened previously? What will happen next?). Content from the ensuing narratives can be coded using different schemes for the need for achievement or fear of failure, which was called *hostile press* in an early scoring system. This procedure has been refined in the contemporary picture story exercise. This fantasy-based assessment procedure is relatively time-consuming and requires extensive training, so a number of researchers attempted to develop parallel self-report measures that could be administered quickly and easily without sacrificing (and possibly even enhancing) validity. When scores from self-reported achievement motives were compared with scores from projective tests, the correlations were unexpectedly small.

After extensive debate over which score was the more valid measure of achievement motives, researchers concluded that both scores were valid and that the difference reflected differences in the motivational systems that were assessed. This discovery contributed to the distinction between implicit and explicit motivation. *Implicit achievement motives* are rooted in affective arousal and are reflected in scores from the projective, fantasy-based measures. *Explicit achievement motives* involve cognitive elaboration and are reflected in scores from the self-report measures. Implicit motives are posited to predict spontaneous, non-declarative outcomes that may be regulated outside of a person's conscious awareness (e.g., procedural learning), whereas explicit motives are posited to predict declarative outcomes of which people are self-consciously aware (e.g., enjoyment). Although the implicit or explicit distinction is still common in the achievement motivation literature, other models refer to these dual processes as *impulsive or automatic* and *reflective or controlled* processes, respectively.

Overall, the motivational taxonomy at the heart of motive-based approaches can be summarized as a 2×2 taxonomy. Both approach and avoidance-based achievement motives exist at implicit, impulsive, or automatic levels and explicit, reflective, or controlled levels of analysis. The vast

majority of research on achievement motives in physical activity contexts has employed explicit motivation measures so relatively little is known about implicit measures of motivation in these contexts.

Within the context of sport, most of the research on achievement motives has focused on fear of failure. This research often equated fear of failure with performance anxiety although it is now clear that athletes may experience anxiety over threats other than failure (e.g., injury, success). This distinction is important because contemporary models of emotion hold that emotions reflect people's ongoing adaptational struggles. Thus, the possibility of failure by itself is insufficient as a stimulus for activating a person's fear of failure because the meaning of failure can vary considerably from one person to the next.

The cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion has been applied to understand the meaning of failure. In a series of studies, five major aversive consequences of failing have been identified. These include *shame and embarrassment, devaluing one's self-estimate, having an uncertain future, upsetting important others,* and *having important others lose interest.* Beliefs in each of these consequences are strongly correlated so there appears to be a general fear of failure that underlies beliefs in each of these specific consequences. Beliefs that failure leads to shame and embarrassment are most closely related to the original definition of fear of failure. Perhaps not surprisingly, this belief was also the most strongly associated with the general fear of failure and seems to be the most relevant for achievement motivation. It is clear that all five of the beliefs are strongly associated, and collectively they provide a better representation of the universe of the fear of failure domain than does any single belief by itself.

Consequences of Achievement Motives

Achievement motives influence people's lives in a variety of ways, although more attention has focused on the impact of fear of failure than on need for achievement. In academic contexts, fear of failure has been linked with decreased moral functioning and increased attention-seeking behavior. From a health perspective, fear of failure is positively associated with anorexia, anxiety, depression, and headache disorders. College students who present for counseling services frequently cite fear of failure as a problem that interferes with their lives and academic performance.

Research within the context of sport has documented that young athletes report fear of failure as a salient source of stress and a reason for dropping out of sport. Athletes have also attributed their use of ergogenic drugs to their fear of failure. Officials, such as umpires and referees, cite fear of failure as a common reason for burnout and turnover in their work.

The most well-established consequences of achievement motives involve achievement goals. People with a strong need for achievement tend to adopt *approach-valenced achievement goals*

such as *mastery-approach* (focused on learning and improving) and *performance-approach goals* (focused on outperforming others). People with a strong fear of failure tend to adopt avoidance-valenced achievement goals such as mastery- avoidance (focused on not making mistakes or getting worse) and performance-avoidance goals (focused on not being outperformed others). People who fear failing may also adopt an approach-to-avoid strategy whereby they adopt performance- approach goals because demonstrating normative competence provides immediate, albeit short-lived, evidence that one is not incompetent. Each of these achievement goals has important consequences for achievement behavior. Over time, consistent patterns of achievement goal involvement contribute to the achievement differences between people with different motive profiles.

Conclusion

Achievement motives are useful theoretical constructs for explaining factors that energize and initially orient achievement behavior. These motives emphasize fundamental differences between people in their approach and avoidance tendencies during competence pursuits. They remain a relevant component of contemporary achievement motivation theories by virtue of their role in predisposing people toward characteristic achievement goals during their competence pursuits. These constructs will remain useful as motivation theories develop more nuanced explanations of how people respond in the different psychological contexts of their competence pursuits.

References:

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See also:

Sports Psychology