Some Definitions of Achievement Motivation

Achievement motivation is affect in connection with evaluated performance in which competition with a standard of excellence was paramount. (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953, pp.76-77)

Intentional actions are usually considered the prototype of all acts of will. Theoretically, a complete intentional action is conceived of as follows: Its first phase is a motivation process, either a brief or a protracted vigorous struggle of motives; a second phase is an act of choice, decision, or intention, terminating this struggle; the third phase is the consummatory intentional action itself, following either immediately or after an interval short or long. (Lewin, 1926, reprinted in 1999, p. 83)

The theory of achievement motivation is a miniature system applied to a specific context, the domain of achievement-oriented activities, which is characterized by the fact that the individual is responsible for the outcome (success or failure), he anticipates unambiguous knowledge of results, and there is some degree of uncertainty or risk (McClelland, 1961). Yet it is our belief that the type of theory that views the strength of an individual’s goal-directed tendency as jointly determined by his motives, by his expectations about the consequences of his actions, and by the incentive values of expected consequences will have wider utility when these concepts are applied toward other goals. (Atkinson & Feather, 1966, p. 5)

Achievement motivation can, therefore, be defined as the striving to increase or to keep as high as possible, one’s own capabilities in all activities in which a standard of excellence is thought to apply and where the execution of such activities can, therefore either succeed or fail. (Heckhausen, 1967, p. 4-5)

a) nAch reflects S’s social status, b) S’s social status also exerts certain specifiable effects on their task preferences and performances, and c) therefore the complex interrelationships between nAch and performance can be rendered more comprehensible by viewing nAch, aspiration, and performance to constitute aspects of an individual’s more or less integrated role-related activity. ... The concepts of “motive” and “role” are obviously not mutually exclusive. Rather they represent different levels of analysis. (Klinger & McNelly, 1969, p. 575)

In the case of an individual, it is not sufficient to say that an individual is at the X percentile in achievement motivation: but alternatively, his profile of the six dimensions identified in the present study [status with experts, acquisitiveness, achievement via independence, status with peers, competitiveness, and concern for excellence], possibly together with others, might be used more precisely to identify the combination of characteristics determining the unique direction of his motivation to achieve. (Jackson, Ahmed, & Heapy, 1976)

Achievement motivation typically refers to the level of one’s motivation to engage in achievement behaviors, based on the interaction of such parameters as need for achievement, expectancy of success, and the incentive value of success. Our construct of motivational orientation refers to the type of motivational stance which the child adopts toward classroom learning. Thus, one may engage in schoolwork for intrinsic reasons, because work is challenging, enjoyable, and piques one’s curiosity, or alternatively, one may engage in schoolwork for extrinsic reasons, either to obtain external approval or because the educational system requires it. (Harter & Connell, 1984, p. 222)
Achievement is task-oriented behavior that allows the individual’s performance to be evaluated according to some internally or externally imposed criterion that involves the individual in competing with others, or that otherwise involves some standard of excellence. ... Behavior is ordinarily described as intrinsically motivated if it is pleasurable in its own right and is not being undertaken merely to obtain some external reward; the reward for performing is inherent in the performance itself. When the individual’s goal is more specifically to meet some standard of performance excellence and part of the reward for indulging in the activity is striving toward and reaching this goal, we refer to intrinsic achievement motivation. ... Successful achievement often brings about consequences that are gratifying to their recipients, such as a pay raise and social recognition. Achievement-oriented behaviors whose goal is to obtain these external or extrinsic rewards can be described as extrinsically motivated. It is possible, of course, for a single set of behaviors to be driven simultaneously by both intrinsic and extrinsic motives. (Spence & Helmreich, 1983, p. 12-13)

Achievement motivation consists of a varied and complex set of assumptions, assessments, predictions, inferences, values, standards, and affective reactions that may be irrational, inaccurate, and contradictory. (Dweck & Elliott, 1983, p. 644)

**A Sample Evolution**

Achievement behavior is best defined as behavior on skill tasks or, at least, on tasks where individuals believe or feel that their competence affects outcomes. Achievement behavior is distinguished from other forms of behavior by its purpose: the goal of achievement behavior is to be or feel competent or incompetent. (Maehler & Nicholls, 1980)

Achievement behavior is behavior directed at developing or demonstrating high rather than low ability. It is shown that ability can be conceived in two ways. First, ability can be judged high or low with reference to the individual’s own past performance or knowledge. In this context, gains in mastery indicate competence. Second, ability can be judged as capacity relative to that of others. In this context, a gain in mastery alone does not indicate high ability. To demonstrate high capacity, one must achieve more with equal effort or use less effort than do others for an equal performance. (Nicholls, 1984, p. 328)

What light can theories of achievement motivation cast on the problem of sustaining optimum motivation for intellectual development in children of all levels of ability? How can we arrange things to that everyone gets a fair share of ... meaningful, competence affirming learning experiences...? (Nicholls, 1989, pp. 3-4)
References