Perceptions, Motivation, and Learning

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Teacher and Student Perceptions: Implications for Learning


In their preface to this book, the editors state:

In recent years educational researchers and practitioners have become increasingly aware of the importance of social processes in classrooms. In trying to explicate social processes in schools, a number of investigators have focused on how students and teachers perceive their own and one another’s performance. Recently, the line between educational and social psychological research on performance perceptions has begun to blur as investigators from the two disciplines become increasingly aware of one another’s work and increasingly interested in exchanging ideas. The purpose of this book is to advance the emerging interdisciplinary dialogue regarding the origin and consequences of performance perceptions in school settings. To this end, we have assembled papers from established investigators in several disciplines who share a common interest in social perception and education. (pp. vii–viii)

For the most part the editors have succeeded masterfully in achieving this goal. The papers collected reflect the thinking of social psychologists, sociologists, educational psychologists, developmental psychologists, motivational psychologists, and behaviorists. Each paper is well thought-out and provides an integrative and, in some cases, theoretically innovative discussion of its topic. The reader is provided with a rich array of some of the most current thinking on social perception and learning as well as three critical chapters written by either a well-known practitioner or a theoretician who is not in complete sympathy with the authors of the chapters in each section. Thus the reader is also provided with a critical appraisal of the issues raised in each section. The editors have succeeded in bringing together important and informative papers that will certainly stimulate further dialogue between theoretically oriented social psychologists and applications-oriented educational psychologists.

The issues raised in the papers make it clear that both sets of scholars have much to gain from this dialogue. Field studies based in the classroom provide the perfect testing ground for many of the psychological theories outlined in these chapters, and educational research is clearly benefiting from the intellectual structure provided by these theories. The book has three major sections. The first concentrates on students’ and teachers’ interpretation of achievement-related behavior. It contains papers by I. Frieze, W. Francis, and B. Hanusa; J. Levine; B. Weiner; M. Rokhemper and J. Brophy; and R. Ames. The papers are critiqued by T. Good. These papers discuss such important issues as the subjective nature of success and failure in school, the role of social comparison in assessing one’s ability and motivation, the potential role of affect in undermining remedial intervention programs, teachers’ interpretations of problem behavior, and teachers’ attributions regarding their own performance as teachers. With the exception of the chapter on social comparison, the discussions rest heavily on attribution theory. Each chapter, however, goes well beyond existing attribution theory, suggesting either important new issues or pointing out important complicating factors that influence attributional processes in the complex environment of the classroom. By and large these chapters are quite theoretical, and as Good eloquently points out, the test of their applicability to educational practice has yet to be evaluated in the field.

Classroom expectations

Section 2, on the effect of performance expectations in classrooms, contains more field-based studies evaluating predictions derived from attribution and expectancy theory and gathering much needed observational data of classroom processes related to expectancy theory. These chapters, authored by P. Blumenfeld, V. L. Hamilton, S. T. Bossert, K. Wessels, and J. Meece, by H. Cooper, by M. Wang, and D. Entwisle and L. Hayduk, discuss such issues as socialization into the student role, communication of teacher expectations, the importance of students’ sense of personal control over their learning, and the development of young children’s school performance expectations. The chapter by Blumenfeld et al. also provides a rich description of elementary classroom life against which we should evaluate the effect of all the attributional phenomena discussed in the other chapters. In his critique of these chapters, Baer points out the need to establish empirically both the causality and the educational importance of attributions and expectations. This critique is strengthened by the results of Entwisle and Hayduk, suggesting that expectations in the early elementary years are a consequence rather than a cause of performance, to the extent that expectations and performance are related at all. Other field-based studies have reached similar conclusions. Thus, although the studies reported in this section are field-based and therefore overcome some of the weaknesses in external validity associated with laboratory studies of educational issues, they are still a long way from demonstrating the power of social perceptions.
I found the two chapters on rewards especially interesting. Although both Lepper and Pittman et al. discuss the educational implications of the numerous laboratory studies of the influence of rewards on motivation, there is a clear need for field-based experimental studies like those outlined by Slavin, Wang, and Allen to evaluate that influence in the classroom. In addition, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the classroom needs to be considered more carefully. Pittman et al., in particular, suggest that it is reasonable to assume that students perceive task involvement as either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Although this may be true for short-term activities like those used in laboratory studies of the influence of rewards on motivation and task preference, I doubt that it is true for such long-term activities as are involved in mastering academic skills. In support of my doubts, my colleagues and I have found that students rate both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons as important determinants of their decisions to enroll in optional math courses. Finally, though Lepper alludes to the possible deleterious effects of reward contingencies on teachers' perceptions of student motivation, this issue is not discussed in any detail. Evidence from industrial psychology suggests that one of the major negative consequences of supervision and reward-contingency control strategies is their effect on managers' perceptions of employees. This phenomenon is one that holds in classroom environments as well. And given the importance of teacher perceptions, this issue warrants further consideration.

In conclusion, this is a fine collection of papers, representing a wide range of approaches, methodologies, and orientations. Although additional topics could have been included, the collection does provide a broad overview of many of the issues in educational psychology that are amenable to a social perceptual analysis.