THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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The national debate on educational excellence has shifted attention away from considerations of intrinsic rewards in learning as the focus on number of courses taken, grades attained, and scores on achievement tests has held center stage. The intrinsic motive in learning has been undermined in the present debate.

Robert White (1959, 1979) proposed that the human being is compelled to engage in attempts at mastering the environment and that feeling that one has competently done so yields a sense of efficacy, a satisfaction with being a cause. Susan Harter (1974, 1975, 1980) extended White's formulation and successfully operationalized the construct of intrinsic motivation. Her Scale of Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Orientation in the Classroom (see Harter, 1980) has two distinct components -- one motivational (does the student prefer challenging work for the pleasure s/he derives from tackling it) and the other informational (does the student prefer to rely on her own or the teacher's direction in classroom directions). Harter has charted ontogenetic changes in the components of the intrinsic motive with age, and has established that the higher one's perceived competence within a domain, the more intrinsic is one's motivational orientation.

The question addressed in the present paper is whether decision-making practices within the family are associated with one's orientation towards learning and teacher direction within the classroom. The opportunity to actively engage in the decision-making process has been identified as an important component of self-definition and a sense of personal competence in early adolescence. The hypothesis of the present study is that the sense of agency experienced as a result of competently engaging in the decision-making process at home will be positively associated with the pleasure of challenge and mastery derived from independent work in the classroom. Decision-making practices characterized by parent-child trust and the use of reason in explaining rules as well as those which treat the child as an agent of her own destiny should support the child's efforts in effectively mastering the environment. Conversely, those family practices which fail to include the child in the decision-making process, which, instead, are characterized by a more autocratic parenting style, should be associated with an extrinsic orientation towards learning. In such families, children would have had fewer opportunities to appreciate the inherent rewards of acting as an agent and the complement of personal competencies involved in decision-making such as assessing situations, weighing choices, voicing opinions, and having oneself be heard.

In short, a sense of personal efficacy should be enhanced to the extent that one perceives that s/he has had opportunities for producing effects. The intrinsic reward associated with this sense of personal efficacy should promote continued seeking out of activities which enhance this sense of agency. Finally, the child's general sense of self-esteem or personal worth should be positively related to both her sense of intrinsic motivation and to her perceptions of personal agency or self-determination in family decision-making.
METHODS

Subjects:
Subjects were 1300 sixth graders from middle and lower middle income communities in southeastern Michigan.

Procedures:
The questionnaire, "Transitions in School Life", was group administered during the math classroom period. Students were advised that the survey was not a test, there were no right answers, and that we were interested in students' opinions on a wide range of subjects.

Measures:
Self-esteem was measured with five items from the Harter global self-esteem scale (see Harter, 1982 for description). Students' perceptions of their family environments were measured with the Epstein and McPartland (1977) Family Decision Making Scale. Intrinsic motivation was measured with a set of fourteen items from three of the Harter (1980) scales (preference for challenge, independent mastery, and independent judgment).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A principal components solution and Kaiser extraction criterion were used in deriving all of the factors reported. Factor analysis of the self-esteem items revealed one common factor which explained 31.4% of the variance amongst the items. A high score on this factor indicates low self-esteem.

Consistent with Harter's description of the higher order factor structure of her motivational orientation scale, two relatively independent factors which explained 32.6% of the variance amongst the items emerged -- the preference for challenge and independent mastery items formed a motivational subscale and the independent judgment items loaded as a factor reflecting a more informational orientation to classroom life. A high score on the motivational factor reflects a high degree of self-reliance and a preference for challenging work; a high score on the second factor reflects reliance on the teacher's judgment rather than on the child's own judgment.

Factor analysis of the 12 Family Decision-Making items revealed a three factor solution which explained 26.6% of the variance amongst the items. An oblique rotation provided the most interpretable solution. Factor I has been labelled the Conflicted Family Factor since students who score high on this factor report that they have a lot of fights with their parents, that mistrust and a lack of reasoning characterize rule making by parents, and that they feel treated like a kid. Factor II has been labelled the Authoritative Parent factor. Students who endorse this factor report that they must get their parents' permission to do most things, that the parents monitor the child's behavior and make most of the family decisions. Although the parents are clearly the voice of authority in these families, the child does not report parent-child conflict nor that s/he feels treated like a kid. Factors I and II are highly correlated (r = .52) but students who endorse Factor I seem more dissatisfied with their family's decision-making practices than do students who endorse Factor II. Factor III has been labelled the Child Participatory Factor since children who endorse this factor report that they participate in decision-making, are trusted to do what is expected of them without parental monitoring, and are treated "more like an adult than like a kid" by their parents. Factors I and III are negatively correlated (r = -.40) and Factors II and III are also negatively correlated (r = -.37).

Boys are more likely than girls to report that their family environments are conflicted (t(1300) = 3.17, p<.001) and girls report that their families provide more opportunities for participating in decision-making (t(1300) = 3.29, p<.001). Whether
parents are treating sons with more control than daughters or boys are more eager for independence and sensitive to issues of independence at this age is unclear. It may be that boys in beginning the process of separation from their families make more attempts at openly asserting independent opinions and thus run into more conflict with parents. They may be more insistent than girls that they be treated like an adult. Girls may be less sensitive to these kinds of independence issues or they may act in a more mature way than boys and may thus be treated more like an adult.

The association between family decision-making style and children's motivational orientation was in the predicted direction although the results were not as straightforward as had been predicted. The Child Participatory Factor was significantly positively correlated with the Preference for Challenge and Mastery Orientation in the Classroom. However, there was no relationship between this factor and reliance on teacher direction within the classroom. No relationship between the Authoritative Parent Factor and either classroom orientation factor was found. The Conflicted Family Factor showed the most significant and consistent relationship with the two motivational orientation factors. Children who reported high parent-child conflict in decision-making were the least likely to prefer challenging work or to report academic self-reliance; interestingly, they were also more likely to feel that their judgments and not the teacher's should prevail in the classroom. These results were true for both boys and girls.

Finally, as predicted, opportunities to participate in decision-making at home and mastery at school were positively correlated with self-esteem. There was a significant positive correlation between low self-esteem and family conflict ($r = .289, p < .001$) and for authoritative parenting and low self-esteem ($r = .159, p < .001$). A significant negative correlation was found for the relationship between low self-esteem and opportunities for child participation in family decision making ($r = -.246, p < .001$). These relationships held for both girls and boys. Similarly, a significant negative correlation was found between mastery and a preference for challenging work and low self-esteem ($r = -.352, p < .001$). No relationship between dependence on the teacher's judgment and self-esteem was found.

The results suggest that there is an association in early adolescence between opportunities for decision-making within the family and an intrinsic orientation towards learning and problem-solving within the classroom. Yet the significance of decision-making opportunities in early adolescence may be more person-dependent than the literature suggests. Specifically, dispositional factors as well as family environment factors may play a part in the child's perceptions of how much conflict exists within the family as well as who should make decisions at home or in the classroom.

Past research has documented a developmental decrease in children's intrinsic orientation to challenge and independent mastery in the academic domain. The early adolescent years, in particular, have been identified as a time when attitudes towards academic achievement take a plunge.

The family has been considered, at least in name, a partner in children's education. If there are identifiable family processes which enhance children's orientation towards intellectual challenge, academic mastery, and an intrinsic interest in learning, they may provide an important complement to the school's efforts in motivating learning.