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MOTIVATIONAL GOALS, PERCEIVED ABILITY, AND THE  
PURPOSE OF SCHOOL: A STUDY OF FORM FIVE  
STUDENTS

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Psychology  
at Massey University

Susan R. Hunt

1989

For my parents,

Ron and Joy Hunt

## ABSTRACT

Students' motivational goals, perceived ability, and beliefs about the purpose of school were investigated by questionnaire. 450 Form Five students participated in the study. The extent to which students differentiate between motivational goals was examined. Predictions were made regarding the relationships between motivational goals and students' perceived ability and beliefs about the purpose of school.

It was found that students did not clearly distinguish between 'task', 'ego', and 'work avoidance' motivational goals. However, when these goals were considered separately they were found to be related to students' perceived ability and beliefs about the purpose of school. Predictions regarding subject - specificity of perceived ability were supported, but predictions of ethnic differences in perceived ability were not. There were slight gender differences in perceived ability and beliefs about the purpose of school.

The findings were discussed in terms of their relationship to other studies, and the implications for past and future methods of studying motivational goals.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of motivation for achievement in school and in later life is widely acknowledged. Indeed, for society to progress, it is important that individuals be committed to increasing their understanding of their world. As Dewey argued, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of the desire to go on learning" (1963, p. 48).

Initially, motivation was seen as a unitary construct and early theories dealt with a limited range of cognitions associated with motivation. The complexity of the achievement motivation construct has now been acknowledged. In particular, attribution theory has been responsible for major advances in our understanding of achievement-related behaviours. Attribution theory is based on the assumption that people search for understanding as to why events occur and that these views, or attributions, can in turn influence future behaviour. Heider (1958) is generally accepted as the first attribution theorist and has influenced subsequent work in the field. Weiner (e.g., 1972) has developed cognitive reformulations of attribution theory and has been largely responsible for the application of concepts of attribution theory to education.

More recently, some other researchers have moved beyond the phase of testing the hypotheses associated with Weiner's model, to a phase of theory revision and elaboration. Causal attributions appear to be at least partly an expression of the individual's world view, including their personal goals. Thus, educational programmes designed to enhance achievement motivation may be improved by attending to

students' personal and educational goals as well as more commonly addressed factors, such as attributions for success and failure (Nicholls, Patashnick & Nolen, 1985).

The work of Maehr and Nicholls in particular, has broadened current conceptions of achievement motivation. Maehr (1983) argued that achievement motivation should be seen as a function of the meaning of achievement for the individual and includes goals and values in addition to causal attributions. Accordingly, individual differences, for example gender and ethnic influences, are receiving considerable attention.

Nicholls has extended Weiner's attribution theory by drawing distinctions between different conceptions of ability and motivational goals. The theories and research findings of Nicholls and Maehr have drawn attention to the ways in which several of the variables they studied may be interrelated. Specifically, the present study focused on the relationships between students' motivational goals, beliefs about the purpose of school, and perceived ability.

Nicholls has distinguished between several distinct forms of motivation which are associated with different motivational goals. The present research investigated 'task', 'ego', and 'work avoidance' motivational goals. Different behaviours are said to be associated with these motivational goals. Positive achievement outcomes have been found to be related to 'task' motivational goals (e.g., Nicholls, 1979; Nicholls et al., 1985). However, in competitive societies the nature of the school environment (e.g., emphasis on norm-referenced examinations) is likely to lead to students adopting 'ego' motivational goals (Nicholls, 1976b). Nicholls (1983) noted that ego-involvement is likely to predominate over task-involvement when conditions, for example competition, induce self-focus or self-evaluation. Before

addressing problems in the school environment which are likely to lead to ego-involvement, it would be useful to determine whether New Zealand high school students distinguish between the motivational goals, and whether they typically have 'task', 'ego', or 'work avoidance' motivational goals. Therefore, the present study addressed the issue of whether New Zealand Form Five students can be clearly grouped according to their predominant motivational goal.

Also, the situation-specificity of motivational goals and perceived ability has not been fully explored in terms of consistency across subject areas. Several researchers (Stipek & Weisz, 1981; Brophy, 1983; Maehr, 1983; Gottfried, 1985; Harter, 1982) have indicated that there may be subject-specific differences, but those who have studied subject-specificity have not been equally specific in their definition of possible forms of motivation. Thus, the present research attended to this problem by studying specified motivational goals ('task', 'ego', and 'work avoidance' goals) and levels of perceived ability, using both 'general school' and subject-specific measures (English and Mathematics). The intent was to determine whether motivational goal and perceived ability vary between academic domains.

Another area of interest to the present study was the relationship of achievement values and achievement motivation. Stipek (1984) noted that little attention has been given to the effect of achievement values on achievement behaviour, and Maehr and Nicholls (1980) have stressed that achievement motivation research must take the function and meaning of behaviour into account. The present research investigated the meaning of school, that is, students' beliefs about the purpose of school. In particular, it was suggested that specified beliefs about the purpose of school may be associated with different motivational goals.

Self-concept of ability, or perceived ability, is seen as an important mediator of achievement behaviour (e.g., Nicholls, 1976a; Kukla, 1978). Despite the documented effects of perceived ability on achievement behaviour however, it is often studied in general terms and as an adjunct to other variables. In the present study perceived ability was examined in relation to motivational goals, in order to investigate relationships between perceived ability and the motivational goals held by students.

Additional variables of interest were gender and ethnic differences in motivational goals, beliefs about the purpose of school, and perceived ability. Research has indicated gender differences in achievement related behaviours and recent conceptions of achievement motivation have pointed to gender differences in the meaning of achievement. Maehr and Nicholls (1980) noted that it is important that researchers take account of the possibility that in many achievement situations, males and females have different goals, and that we must first define these goals before we can adequately explain the behaviours associated with them. Thus, one purpose of this study was to identify the motivational goals typical of males and females. Other studies have indicated that females often see themselves as having low ability (e.g., Sherman, 1980; Nicholls, 1980; Kukla, 1978). Such self-perceptions would have a negative effect on females' current and future levels of achievement. Given that females are often suggested to be more 'socially' oriented than males, predictions were also made regarding females' beliefs about the purpose of school.

With regard to ethnicity, an examination of the literature has indicated the need to take ethnic differences into account when studying achievement motivation. It has become apparent that there are cultural variations in how students value school and that not only

may students have different achievement goals, but they may pursue these goals in different ways (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980). While stereotypes regarding Maori/Pakeha differences abound in New Zealand, there is a lack of objective evidence, particularly with regard to ethnic differences in motivational goals. The present study examined ethnic differences in motivational goals and perceived ability.

In conclusion, the findings of achievement motivation research suggest that motivational goals are related to students' perceptions of ability and beliefs about the purpose of school. However, the relationships between these variables have not been fully investigated as yet; nor have subject-specificity or gender and ethnic differences been taken into account adequately. Thus, the purpose of the present research was to investigate relationships between motivational goals, beliefs about the purpose of school, and perceived ability. The need to determine the motivational goal groups of New Zealand high school students, and the possibility of subject-specificity of motivational goals and perceived ability was addressed. Predictions were also made concerning gender and ethnic differences.