Achievement as a Moral System

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This paper examines the moral components of achievement striving. First, the general process of inferring that another is responsible for an untoward event (such as school failure) is considered. That process includes location of the cause within a person, the cause must be subject to volitional control, and there should be an absence of mitigating circumstances. Hence, lack of effort particularly results in an assignment of responsibility for failure.

A conceptual analysis of the distinction between ability and effort is then offered in which the assignment of responsibility and the affective reactions elicited by this belief play key roles in mediating between an achievement outcome and the evaluation of this outcome. Evidence is reviewed revealing that assignments of responsibility for failure elicit anger, whereas judgments of nonresponsibility are accompanied by pity and sympathy. These emotions, in turn, guide subsequent reprimand versus help-giving toward the failing student.

Three new research directions are then pointed out. The first area builds on a distinction between onset versus offset responsibility for achievement failure. If one does not put forth effort after an initial failure was due to uncontrollable factors (e.g., illness), then negative reactions are exacerbated. A second area of research reviewed pertains to the perceived fairness of achievement evaluation. A "fair" evaluation, i.e., one guided by moral principles, is one in which punishment for failure due to lack of effort is relatively harsh, whereas punishment for failure due to low ability is minimal. Individuals believe that they follow this moral guideline to a greater extent than do others. Finally, the third area of research that was examined pertains to what adolescents communicate to peers and adults following achievement outcomes. The data reveal that adolescents tell their peers that they did not try, but tell parents and teachers than they "cannot". The studies thus reflect on the perceived value placed on effort.

The paper concludes with a discussion of achievement as a moral system. A new research direction is suggested, focusing on the perception of achievement values and moral obligation, rather than the consideration of manipulations that make achievement for "fun".

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