



The Presence of Implicit Theories of Motivation in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Past research suggests that six implicit theories of motivation (ITMs) are commonly held among managers in the workplace (Dickson & Wendorf, 1999). The present research seeks to examine ITMs in an academic setting to assess whether students hold these same implicit theories. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with 18 statements corresponding to six common ITMs and also responded to a forced-choice questionnaire. Findings were similar to Dickson and Wendorf's (1999) study of managers and employees, suggesting students' beliefs are comparable to implicit theories held by managers. This research provides an increased understanding of students' beliefs, which is essential in determining the best methods to facilitate students' academic motivation.

METHOD

Participants: 159 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course.

Procedure

- Students rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with 18 statements, 3 for every ITM, on a 6-point likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree)
- Students also responded to 60 forced-choice comparisons that paired each ITM against all others and included 2 statements for each of the 6 ITMs.

Table 1: Example ITM Questionnaire Items

ITM	"I believe that, in attempting to motivate his or her students, it is more effective for an instructor to:"
Equity Theory	Avoid showing any signs of favoritism for any one student.
Goal Setting Theory	Develop goals and objectives that the students can work towards.
Job Characteristics Theory	Help the students understand how their work fits in with the coursework as a whole.
Self-Direction Theory	Give students guidance on what has to be done, but allow them to take the initiative to determine how to do it.
Reinforcement Theory	Award students with good grades for superior performance on coursework.
Theory X	Actively direct and monitor individual student performance as closely as possible.

INTRODUCTION

Implicit Theories of Motivation

Implicit Theories are defined as "Naive, personal collections of assumptions about how things are related and the way the organizational world works" (Gioia & Sims, 1989, p. 10).

Background

- Past researchers have examined Managerial Implicit Theories of Motivation, which are assumptions about the best way to motivate a subordinate that are derived from past experience and personal beliefs (Dickson & Wendorf, 1999).
- Dickson and Wendorf (1999) identified six common implicit theories of motivation among managers:
 1. **Equity Theory:** Emphasizes equal exchanges between managers and employees.
 2. **Goal Setting Theory:** Emphasizes motivation through achieving personal goals
 3. **Job Characteristics Theory:** Emphasizes personal responsibility
 4. **Self Direction Theory:** Emphasizes employee control.
 5. **Positive Reinforcement Theory:** Emphasizes employee recognition.
 6. **Theory X:** Emphasizes managerial control over all employee tasks.

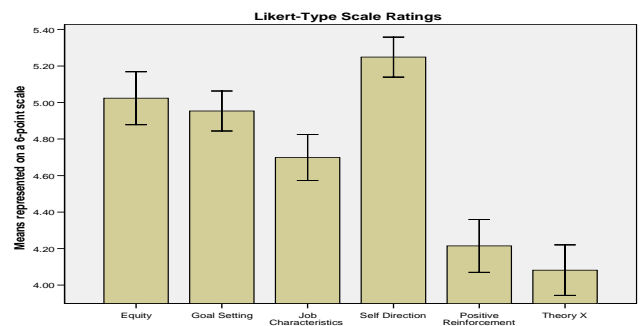
Study Purposes

1. **To what extent do students hold ITMs about the classroom and do they reflect patterns similar to those held by managers in the workplace?**
Dickson and Wendorf (1999) found Self-Direction theory to be the most supported MITM and Theory X to be least supported among managers.
2. **Can the use of Likert-Type ratings and a forced choice questionnaire yield comparable patterns?**

RESULTS

Likert-Type Ratings Analyses

- **Scores for Each Student:** All likert-type scale responses for each student were averaged for each MITM, yielding six scores.
- A repeated measures ANOVA revealed that the six theories were rated significantly different, $F(5,785) = 73.688, p < .001$.
- Self Direction Theory was rated significantly higher than all others, with the exception of Equity Theory. Theory X and Positive Reinforcement were rated significantly lower than all others.
- Each of the means was transformed into normal deviates in order for comparisons to be made between the Likert-type responses and the forced-choice responses.

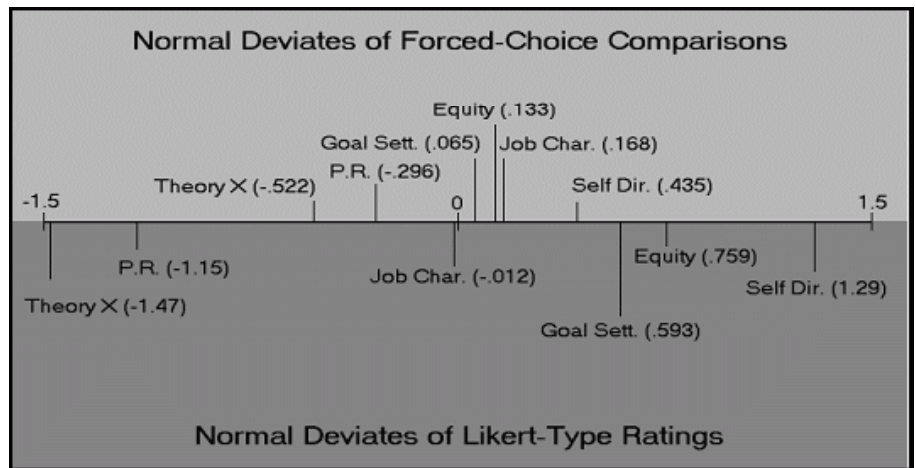


Note: Error Bars represent 95% Confidence Intervals

RESULTS

Forced-Choice Comparisons versus Ratings

- Forced choice comparisons yielded proportions for the number of times a particular theory was chosen. From those proportions, z scores were obtained in order to acquire results on a standardized scale (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).
- Data from these measures revealed a very similar pattern in students' rankings of each theory, which suggests that Likert-type ratings can be used in place of forced choice comparisons
- The Likert scale ratings did, however, produced much greater discrimination between each theory than did the forced choice comparisons.
- These data also show a very similar pattern to Dickson and Wendorf's (1999) study of MITMs held by managers, suggesting these theories may indeed exist in classroom situations.



DISCUSSION

Common Beliefs about Motivation:

- Across all students, there appears a general pattern in which students believe Self-Direction Theory is the most effective motivational technique and Theory X is the least effective.
- Pattern shows similar findings to Dickson and Wendorf's (1999) study of managers.

Measures

- Students' beliefs in ITMs can be measured using both Likert-type ratings and forced choice questionnaires since both measures yielded similar patterns in students' rankings.
- However, more discrimination among the six theories appeared with the use of the Likert-type ratings.
- These findings suggest Likert-type ratings may be more desirable in measuring students' beliefs.

Limitations and Future Directions

- Future research should study instructors' ITMs and their congruence with students' beliefs on actual teaching styles.
- Is motivation increased when students' and instructors' beliefs match? How well do ITM preferences predict classroom outcomes?

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