ILL Request: 28627648
FREE
Borrower: OSO

KNIGHT
AVAILABLE

CAN YOU SUPPLY? YES NO CONDITIONAL FUTURE DATE

Affiliation: Libraries Very Interested in Sharing (LVIS)
Status: PENDING 20070308 Request Date: 20070308 Need Before: 20070407
OCLC: 37801327 Source: ILLiad Due Date:
Lender: *ORU, ORU, OUP, ORZ, WOSRequest
CALLNO:

Title: Motivation and self-regulation across the life span /
Article: Skinner, E.A.: Commentary: Strategies for studying social influences on motivation
Date: 1998
Pages: 216-234
ISBN: 9780521591768 (hardcove

Verified: <TN:69353><ODYSSEY: 59.121.122.6/ILL> OCLC
Type: Copy
Patron: Greene, Teresa
Bill To: same
Ship Via: ARIEL 159.121.122.36 or FIRST CLASS MAIL. Electronic Delivery: Odyssey - 159.121.122.6/ILL
Maximum Cost: IFM - 20.00
Copyright Compliance: CCL
Fax: 503-588-7119 Ariel: 159.121.122.36 Phone 503-378-5022
Email: debra.1.sparber@state.or.us
Borrowing Notes: OREGON STATE LIBRARY DOES NOT CHARGE FOR LOANS OR PHOTOCOPIES.
Lending Charges:
Shipped:
Lending Notes:
Lending Restrictions:
Return To:
Return Via:

ILL
Oregon State Library
250 Winter St. NE
Salem, OR 97301-3950

file://C:\Documents and Settings\ill-staff\Desktop\illmx.xml
Commentary: Strategies for Studying Social Influences on Motivation

Ellen A. Skinner

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest strategies to aid researchers as they explore the social factors that contribute to children’s motivation. These suggestions are based on three general principles: (1) children actively participate in the processes by which social factors shape their motivation; (2) the social context includes multiple dimensions and multiple levels; and (3) the elements in the equation, namely the social context and children’s motivation, as well as the mechanisms that connect them, change with development. From this perspective, children are assumed to be active in selecting, initiating, interpreting, and provoking interactions with multiple and changing social partners and their proxies. A strong theoretical perspective on how these interpretations – for example, experiences of self-determination or helplessness – influence children’s motivation then allows researchers to move “backward” to an identification of the broad dimensions of social interactions (such as autonomy support or chaos) that are expected to have an impact on children’s interpretations. As a next step, researchers can try to analyze the multiple pathways through which social partners communicate these dimensions to children. In describing each of these steps, I suggest how sensitization to the possibility that these processes are developmental may guide the direction of research. I then use the work described in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this volume to illustrate how these principles can add to the study of the social factors that shape children’s motivation.

Support from research grant no. HD11914 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, from Training Grant no. 527594 from the National Institute of Mental Health, and from a Faculty Scholars Award from the William T. Grant Foundation are gratefully acknowledged.
Introduction

Parents and educators know that children’s motivation is shaped by their social contexts. They know that social relationships and social interactions influence children’s exertion, interest, enthusiasm, and persistence in the face of failure. Despite this common knowledge, however, psychologists sometimes seem hard pressed to provide a detailed and comprehensive empirical account of the specific social factors that contribute to children’s motivation, including precisely how these factors exert their effects and whether they change with development.

To be sure, fifty years of concentrated research has made significant inroads into these important questions (see Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998, for a review). Early phases of research examined correlations between global dimensions of parenting, such as warmth and control, and child motivational outcomes, such as locus of control and achievement motivation (Lefcourt, 1982). A second strand involved the experimental analysis of effects of very specific manipulations, such as noncontingency, repeated failure, rewards, and competition (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Seligman, 1975). And from the beginning, application-oriented research has been conducted – in parenting and especially in education – in which researchers have attempted to train parents to be contingent, responsive, and sensitive (Riksen-Walraven, 1978) or have helped institute cooperative learning-oriented or mastery-oriented curricula in classrooms, and then have examined the effects on children’s control or intrinsic motivation (Ames & Ames, 1985).

Perhaps it is surprising that even after all this important work, the literature provides only partial conclusions about the social contributors to motivation. The early global work led to confusion about the precise contextual dimensions that were involved. For example, confusion still exists about the effects of one of the main dimensions of parenting: warmth. In a review of the research on social antecedents of locus of control up to 1982, Lefcourt stated that the dimension of parenting that showed the most consistent positive effects on locus of control was parental “warmth.” In contrast, in 1983, Crandall and Crandall published the results of arguably the best study of parental influences on locus of control: a longitudinal study in which parent interactions with children had been observed in early childhood, and in which locus of control was assessed in early adolescence. In this study, maternal warmth was negatively correlated with locus of control; Crandall and Crandall (1983) hypothesized that perhaps warmth discouraged children from taking internal responsibility for failure, whereas
relatively less maternal involvement allowed children more opportunities to experience the effects of their actions. One conclusion about work examining the connections between global parenting antecedents and child motivational outcomes is that it was useful in providing a big picture, but the picture seemed somewhat unfocused.

On the other hand, experimental work has consistently been clear and precise on conceptual dimensions; however, it can be difficult to translate some experimental manipulations into actual interactions in families, in schools, or with peers. For example, where can one find the noncontingency that may produce helplessness in school? Is it in interactions with the teacher? In attempts to comply with the rules of the classroom? In the challenges provided by the materials and activities of schoolwork? Or is it somewhere in previous interactions with parents? It is possible to critique this work as a whole by pointing out that it provided many very clear pieces but left researchers unsure about what the entire puzzle looked like.

Finally, when considering the results of application research, it is fair to conclude that these intervention studies produced many successes. However, effects tended to be global: It was unclear why or for whom they were working. These interventions also introduced researchers to the complex issues surrounding unintended side effects. For example, a token economy might promote a sense of control through its high contingencies, but what are its effects on self-determination and intrinsic motivation? Or, cooperative learning might have advantages for effort and for peer relations, but does it have disadvantages for an individual’s estimates of his or her own competence and ability?

The goal of this chapter is not to review the research on social antecedents of motivation (see, e.g., Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) but instead to suggest new avenues for approaching these old questions. Suggestions attempt to build on the strengths of earlier work, while keeping in mind its shortcomings. These “new” strategies are based on three principles that together form a set of core assumptions about the individual and social nature of motivation, which can be seen in many strands of current research on the development of children’s motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dweck, 1991; Harter, 1978; Skinner, 1995; Weisz, 1983, 1986). The unique contribution of this chapter is that it attempts to articulate these principles and to examine their usefulness in guiding the study of the social influences of motivation (see Table 8.1).

Because the chapters in Part II of this volume provide cutting-edge examples of the best work in this area, I will use them, along with other current research, to illustrate the strategies proposed. The three principles,
Table 8.1. Three general principles to guide research on social influences on motivation

1. Individuals actively participate in the processes by which social factors shape their motivation.
   a. They seek and select social partners and situations and initiate interactions.
   b. They interpret social interactions and relationships.
   c. They provoke reactions from social partners.
2. The social context includes multiple dimensions and multiple levels.
   a. The general ways in which social contexts influence motivation are captured by theoretically derived dimensions (e.g., structure).
   b. The specific ways these are communicated to individuals are many and exist at multiple levels.
   c. The communications that influence motivation may be contradictory.
3. The elements in the equation, namely the social context and children’s motivation, as well as the mechanisms that connect them, change with development.
   a. Individuals develop, normatively and differentially.
   b. Contexts change, normatively and differentially.
   c. The mechanisms that mediate the effects of social factors on motivation may change with development as well.

which I will discuss in turn, are: (1) Children actively participate in the processes by which social factors shape their motivation; (2) the social context includes multiple dimensions and multiple levels; and (3) the elements in the equation, namely the social context and children’s motivation, as well as the mechanisms that connect them, change with development.

**Children Actively Participate in the Processes by Which Social Factors Shape Their Motivation**

The first assumption simply alerts researchers to the fact that between the two phenomena that they wish to connect – that is, between social forces and children’s motivation – is an active participating individual, the child. The first major implication is the idea that social relationships and interactions are perceived and interpreted by children, and it is these interpretations that in turn diminish or bolster their motivation. The second major implication is the idea that children are also active in provoking reactions from the social context.

**Children as Participants**

Common to most theories of motivation is the assumption that children actively interpret their social interactions and attempt to discover what these
interactions reveal about themselves and about how the social world works. These are not usually considered to be fleeting, situation-specific perceptions, but instead to consist of experiences that accumulate and become organized as sets or systems of beliefs. In fact, children seem to bring pre-conceived notions (sometimes referred to as biases or styles) with them into many situations. These contribute greatly to children’s experiences of social interactions and may even override concurrent opposing situational cues.

Theories differ with regard to the perceptions and interpretational processes they postulate as mediating the relationship between social interactions and children’s motivation. The chapters in this volume provide excellent examples of a variety of theoretical perspectives. Grounded in attribution theory, Graham’s work begins with a child who is aware of and busily interpreting cues from social partners about the causes of performance, such as ability and effort, or about the intentionality of negative acts. This strong theoretical approach has allowed for a well-guided search for the kinds of social interactions and cues that may communicate causal information to children. In her earlier work, Graham (1984) has examined the subtle effects of emotional cues (i.e., anger and pity) on causal attributions with the perhaps surprising finding that following failure, teacher anger communicates to the child that a controllable cause, such as lack of effort, was responsible for the outcome, whereas a sympathetic reaction can lead the child to infer that an uncontrollable cause, such as ability, was responsible. In Chapter 5 of this volume, Graham uses an attributional analysis to suggest hypotheses about the patterns of parental praise and blame that are likely to communicate to children the intentionality of negative acts.

In Cantor and Sanderson’s work, the active adolescent is also depicted clearly. According to these authors, although adolescents generally take on the life tasks assigned by their cultural and subcultural groups, each adolescent nevertheless creates his or her own set of goals within those life tasks, and these goals guide the specific strategies used to work on the tasks. For example, within the general culturally assigned task of social dating, Cantor and Sanderson (Chapter 7, this volume) examine how different goals (e.g., establishing identity versus intimacy) influence the kinds of dating relationships that adolescents seek out and how they behave within those relationships.

In Pomerantz and Ruble’s work, the active individual is also clearly present—in this case, the child experiencing him- or herself as incompetent, or forming high standards, or depending on external approval. This view of the child’s inner workings led to a differentiated view of the social contextual dimensions of parenting and teaching. One of Pomerantz and Ruble’s great-
The most contributions has been the careful analysis of a dimension sometimes referred to as “control,” which is typically considered to range from permissiveness to restrictiveness. Predictions about the effects of this dimension seem contradictory, because two different strands of research lead to two different conclusions about its effects on motivation. According to learned helplessness theories, low parental control is detrimental because noncontingency produces helplessness and passivity in children. In contrast, researchers studying intrinsic motivation conclude that high parental control is harmful to children’s motivation because it undermines their intrinsic interest in activities.

Pomerantz and Ruble (Chapter 6, this volume) suggest one solution to this problem when they distinguish two aspects of the dimension “permissiveness to restrictiveness.” They separate one aspect “in the form of rules and standards . . . central to children’s healthy functioning as it provides children with information about how to meet adult standards and engage in appropriate behavior” from a second aspect that “communicates to the individual being regulated that his or her actions do not stem from the self, but instead are the consequences of external pressures, and that he or she is not capable of controlling the surrounding environment” (Chapter 6, this volume).

A similar distinction has been introduced by the originators of cognitive evaluation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1982), and we have also adapted it for use in our own work (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Cognitive evaluation theory states that children have a need to be both competent, or effective in their interactions with the environment, and autonomous, or self-determined in their goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). From this perspective, permissive versus restrictive is not a useful bipolar dimension, because one pole of the dimension – namely, permissiveness – should be beneficial to autonomy because it allows children freedom, whereas the other pole of the dimension – namely, restrictiveness – should be beneficial to competence because it provides consistency and contingency.

However, beginning with the child’s perspective, and asserting that children need support for both autonomy and competence, it becomes clear that permissiveness versus restrictiveness actually combines two different dimensions. If permissiveness, or freedom, supports autonomy then its opposite (which undermines autonomy) is not restrictiveness, or firm limit-setting, but instead is coercion. And, if the structure of restrictiveness supports the experience of competence, then its opposite, which can produce helplessness, is not permissiveness but chaos. According to this perspective, children need both freedom (in order to exercise autonomy) and structure (in
order to develop competence). Of course, if authoritative parenting is high on structure and autonomy support, then they can’t really be opposite poles of the same dimension.

**Children as Initiators**

A second implication of the notion that children are active participants in the social interactions and relationships that shape their motivation is the idea that children, through their own characteristics and behaviors, provoke reactions from the social context. When children are passive, bored, angry, aggressive, or anxious, then social partners – including parents, peers, and teachers – respond to these cues (e.g., Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Social reactions typically magnify initial individual differences, for better or for worse (Kindermann & Skinner, 1992). Aggressive children provoke more hostile reactions from peers and adults. Rebellious children provoke more coercion and arbitrary limit-setting from teachers. Anxious children solicit more help and are awarded easier tasks and more pity. Children with low motivation select peers who are likewise low in engagement (Kindermann, 1993). Children who are already highly enthusiastic and interested receive more autonomy support and more challenging tasks from teachers (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

The picture that Cantor and Sanderson paint of adolescent social dating suggests an even more active role for the individual. For example, adolescents who have self-focused identity goals actually tend to seek out or create multiple, shorter-lasting, more superficial dating relationships. In fact, Cantor and Sanderson (Chapter 7, this volume) argue that adolescents have a proclivity to structure their daily lives so that they afford pursuit of their self-chosen goals and maximize the effectiveness of the strategies in their own repertoire. In the area of social dating, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that the reactions of social partners might also magnify an adolescent’s initial goal orientation. If an adolescent is self-focused and wants to use social dating as a means of exploration, he or she will likely seek out like-minded adolescents who will encourage these goals. Or, if the adolescent hooks up with adolescents who desire more intimacy, the behavior of the self-directed adolescent (i.e., engaging in multiple, more superficial relationships) would be likely to drive away partners who could potentially teach the adolescent about the possibilities and values of intimacy.

Reactions that magnify individual differences are typical. However, it would be useful if researchers could not only document the reciprocal role of the child in shaping the social context, but also search out “unnatural”
but developmentally corrective compensatory reactions from social partners. Who are the teachers who know how to provide autonomy support to oppositional or reactive children? Who are the parents who can support an anxious child in challenging situations? What can interventions do to foster these compensatory social relationships, which may help to prevent the “motivationally poor” from becoming poorer? Research exploring these questions will allow a fuller understanding of the active role individuals play in their own motivational development.

One controversial, but potentially interesting, way of characterizing the full nature of children’s active role in shaping their motivation is the concept of psychological needs. Analogous to the concept of physiological needs of hunger and thirst, psychological needs refer to the experiences children require for their healthy psychological development. These needs, which are hypothesized to be inborn and innate – a part of “human nature” – lead children to seek out opportunities for their fulfillment, to respond with joy and enthusiasm to opportunities that exercise them, and to become despondent and disaffected when placed in environments that discourage them.

Proponents of the notion of needs often refer to them as sources of children’s intrinsic motivation. For example, in 1959, White reviewed evidence that children come with an innate need to experience themselves as effective in their interactions with the environment. The concept of effectance motivation underlies many theories of motivation today (e.g., Harter, 1978) and is one explanation for the strong motivational consequences of perceived competence and control (Skinner, 1995). Other motivational theories suggest that children also are born with the need to experience themselves as autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and as connected to others (Ainsworth, 1979, 1989). Recent motivational perspectives suggest that all three needs may be sources of children’s motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Needs theories place the ultimate source of motivation inside children and so, in some sense, assign a relatively smaller role to social factors. According to this perspective, children – even infants – do not require social contexts to socialize them to desire achievement or affiliation; children are born with these desires. These theories suggest that children’s innate needs dictate the kinds of experiences that contexts must provide if they are to allow children the opportunity to “motivate themselves.” Needs, in a very real way, dictate the possible roles and routes for social partners in shaping children’s motivation. In this sense, needs theories assign more power to individuals than do theories that suggest that sources of motivation are external to the child.
The Social Context Includes
Multiple Dimensions and Multiple Levels

A focus on the active individual, which allows researchers to work "backward" from children's experience to analyze the kinds of social interactions that are expected to influence them, also produces a more differentiated view of the social context and its dimensions. From previous experimental work, it is clear that a strong theoretical orientation that specifies both the experience of the child and its general antecedents is extremely useful in this analysis. However, from the early global work on parenting comes the suggestion that careful thought is needed to determine how some of these theoretical dimensions then operate— not in the lab, but in interactions in the real world.

Social Contextual Dimensions

A focus on the child’s experience provides a bridge between social factors and motivational outcomes, but it is only a first step in specifying the variety of pathways through which social contexts and interactions in everyday life can shape motivation. An important next step is to identify (usually theoretically) the general contextual dimensions that are expected to shape children’s experiences, and then to figure out how these would be manifest in specific social contexts, such as schools, family homes, or dating relationships.

Motivational theories currently seem strong in their capacity to specify theoretically the general contextual dimensions that influence specific experiences. For example, if the target is children’s experience of themselves as self-determining, the general contextual dimension referred to as autonomy support versus coercion can be identified as central in allowing (or not allowing) children opportunities to be self-determining (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Ryan, 1982). Theoretically, this dimension describes the extent to which the social context allows children freedom and respects their wishes and desires as opposed to attempting to control, manipulate, or force them into complying with someone else’s agenda.

In a parallel fashion, theories that are based on children’s experience of themselves as competent generally conclude that a contextual dimension often referred to as structure versus chaos is central in providing opportunities for children to experience themselves as effective (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, 1991, 1995). This dimension describes the extent to which social contexts are consistent and contingent, and the extent to which these...
contexts provide information about the pathways for reaching desired outcomes and avoiding undesired outcomes as well as support children in their attempts to follow those pathways.

Also clear are the theoretical dimensions that provide children opportunities to experience themselves as related, connected, or belonging (Ainsworth, 1979, 1989; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). These opportunities are usually captured by the dimension of warmth and involvement versus hostility and neglect, and refer to the extent to which social partners communicate affection and caring versus dislike and rejection, and the extent to which they are emotionally and physically available versus emotionally distant or physically absent.

Social Interactions

In contrast to the clarity of these theoretical dimensions is the difficulty of determining the multiplicity of social avenues through which they are communicated to children. For example, when considering how children can be “coerced” by social contexts, it becomes clear that virtually limitless routes are available, both intentional and unintentional. Studies have documented that seemingly trivial word choices such as “should” and “you better” can rob children of their perceived freedom (Deci, Driver, Hastehkiss, et al., in press). At the opposite end of the spectrum, seemingly vast ingrained social patterns, such as gender role stereotypes, can constrain children from acting on their actual desires and interests (Porterantz & Ruble, Chapter 6, this volume).

Research programs have been painstakingly tracing the many and varied pathways through which broad social contextual dimensions such as involvement, structure, and autonomy support make their way into children’s daily lives. They focus on how experiences of belongingness, abandonment, control, helplessness, self-determination or “pawn-dom” are co-constructed by the child and his or her social partners in the contexts of the real world. The recognition that the social context has many levels allows researchers to examine a wide variety of social partners and their proxies—in rules, materials, physical space, time constraints, schedules, and curricula. Researchers attempt to determine what these partners actually do to, with, or for children. How do children interpret these interactions? What do children take away from them?

Not surprisingly, this orientation has led to more detailed, process-oriented observations, including studies by contributors to this volume (see Dweck, Chapter 10, this volume; Graham, Chapter 5, this volume;
and Pomerantz & Ruble, Chapter 6, this volume; e.g., Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, et al., 1978) and others (e.g., Hokoda & Fincham, 1995; Pintrich & Blumenfeld, 1985). These observations are complemented by analyses of children's interpretations of their interactions. Such research programs are beginning to produce a sequential view of how interactive and reciprocal processes might unfold. For example, in Graham's research, the process begins with parents whose interpretations of social interactions are colored by a blaming, accusatory bias and children who perhaps are a bit more active temperamentally. These parents mete out harsh, seemingly arbitrary punishment to their children, accompanied by blame; this pattern is probably unmitigated by children's excuses or explanations. As a result, children experience the world as hostile and begin to interpret even ambiguous social acts as hostile, ignoring contradictory cues. In turn, these children react to peers with aggression and retaliation, and provide no explanations. This turns out to be an effective strategy for provoking aggression and retaliation even from originally nonaggressive peers. If this strategy is enacted in school, it can also provoke anger, blame, and harsh limit-setting from otherwise supportive teachers. Consequently, the child concludes that the world is indeed a very hostile place.

Interaction Among Contextual Dimensions

An additional challenge to motivational theories stems from the fact that children's motivation is shaped by many experiences and that the social contextual interactions that support these experiences may, in combination, be contradictory. In trying to support children in one way, people within the social context may inadvertently undermine some other aspect of children's experience that itself has an effect on motivation. The possibility of trade-offs and unintended side effects has been brought to the attention of researchers through application-oriented research and interventions.

The three theoretical dimensions described earlier can provide examples of how challenging it can be to provide children with optimal support for motivation – in this case, an optimal combination of involvement, structure, and autonomy support. Intrinsic motivation theorists have pointed out that too much structure can unintentionally become coercive, when children experience the provision of information about strategies as pressure to enact them. Similarly, too much parental involvement can become intrusive as children attempt to establish their own goals and exercise their own competencies. Conversely, too much autonomy support can be experienced as chaotic or negligent if children wish for more guidance and closeness.

At this point, I do not believe that the end poles of any of these dimen-
tions are necessarily defined by the other dimensions; that is, I do not believe that "too much" structure becomes coercion. However, I do hold that when parents and teachers attempt to provide children with involvement, structure, or autonomy support, they should also be aware of the effects of their behavior on the other dimensions as well. If adults focus only on one dimension in promoting motivation, they may end up inadvertently undermining a complementary source.

Alternatively, social contexts can be contradictory because they consist of multiple social partners, each with their own agendas, demands, and reactions to children's behavior. For example, Cantor and Sanderson point out that "Adolescents receive multiple, and at times conflicting, messages from friends, parents, and society about appropriate rules for dating and sexual behavior" (Chapter 7, this volume). Even within the peer context, adolescents may experience conflicting demands as when, for example, friends resent the time taken by new romantic relationships, or romantic partners attempt to sever old friendship ties (Zimmer-Gembeck, 1998).

Development and Social Influences on Motivation

For the most part, the study of children's motivation and its social antecedents has been conducted by personality and social psychologists from a perspective that emphasizes individual differences. Developmentalists seemed largely content with the important task of documenting normative developmental changes in cognitive, perceptual, and social processes connected to motivation, such as changes in the use of causal schemes, social comparison information, or perceptions of one's own ability (e.g., H. Heckhausen, 1982, 1984).

Relatively recently, however, some theorists have attempted to bring together these lines of work (e.g., Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Harter, 1978; Skinner, 1995). These theorists suggest to individual-difference researchers that the elements they have been studying (namely, the social context and children's motivation), as well as the mechanisms that connect them, change with development. They also suggest to developmentalists that some of the normative changes they are studying may in some sense open the door to new sources of social influences on individual differences in children's motivation.

The Developing Person

If one answer to the riddle of social influences on motivation begins with the understanding of children's interpretations of social interactions, then changes in how these social interactions are processed should inform the
study of social contributors. Excellent examples of this work can be found in the study of developmental changes in how causal information is processed, and how this affects the kind of social cues that lead to attributions at different ages (e.g., Graham, Chapter 5, this volume). Recently, reviews have appeared that attempt to describe the developmental changes that influence children’s motivation, for example, their achievement motivation (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) or their perceptions of control (Skinner, 1995).

As yet, surprisingly little has been studied about how social context communications are experienced by children of different ages. It is obvious, for example, that the same behaviors that communicate parental love to infants (e.g., cuddling, nuzzling) are inappropriate expressions of warmth for older children. This common knowledge has resulted in assessments of social factors that are developmentally appropriate; consequently, when assessing the same construct (e.g., limit-setting) at different ages, psychologists should examine different behaviors. However, this methodology also prevents the direct examination of developmental differences in the kinds of social interactions that communicate motivational supports to children (Kindermann & Skinner, 1992). How are warmth and affection best communicated to adolescents? What is the best way to provide structure for infants? How can parents support the autonomy of 2-year-olds? These questions must be answered in the construction of developmentally adapted interventions to improve children’s motivation.

Development will also continue to be a theme in individual-differences work on motivation as researchers attempt to trace the origins of individual differences. If some children come to social interactions with attributional biases or preferred goals and strategies, developmentalists already want to know about the history of experiences that contributed to these individual differences. Clear examples of how a cumulative history of interactions can produce a bias that shapes future interactions can be found in Pomerantz and Ruble’s discussion (Chapter 6, this volume) of how early styles of interpretation lead to later vulnerability when negotiating transitions. Likewise, Graham (Chapter 5, this volume) makes clear predictions about how children’s early interactions with parents who blame can lead to later biases that themselves create more hostile interactions, this time with peers.

The “Developing” Context

In considering social influences on motivation, it is also possible to imagine how contexts can themselves undergo both normative and individual
change over time. For example, Pomerantz and Ruble (Chapter 6, this volume) describe how normative school transitions result in age-graded opportunities and demands. Normatively, because of regular shifts in classroom structure during middle school and junior high school, students have less frequent and less intense contact with teachers, so the level of teacher involvement with students normatively declines during adolescence (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, et al. 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). As another example, in typical classrooms in the United States, the basis of student feedback changes from evaluations based on participation and effort to evaluations based on successful completion of academic tasks. This normative shift changes the source of contingencies that shape children’s perceived control from teacher behavior to academic performance (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1995, in press).

Contexts are also instrumental in shaping differential development by providing different opportunities, expectations, demands, and translations for different people. Pomerantz and Ruble are examining these processes in girls; Graham examines their effects on African American children, especially boys.

Mechanisms of Development

The processes that mediate between social factors and children’s motivation may themselves change with age. Because mechanisms are usually the last aspect of a process to be studied, relatively little is known empirically about this possibility. However, whenever these processes have been examined directly, evidence has been found to support the notion that mediators “develop” or at least change with development. It makes sense to include the possibility in future research.

For example, one social factor that influences children’s interest and persistence in difficult tasks is the provision of help. An understanding of the developmental course of children’s interpretation of parent help (e.g., H. Heckhausen, 1984; J. Heckhausen, 1988) suggests that at very young ages, before the age of 2, children’s motivation for challenging tasks is augmented by adult provision of help. However, after children form a conception of personal competence based on individual performance, adult help interferes with motivation.

Another example can be found in our own work on perceived control as a mediator of the effects of social context (interactions with teachers) on children’s engagement in the classroom. As part of a longitudinal study, we have detected developmental shifts in the aspects of perceived control that
appear to regulate children’s motivation (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1995, in press). In the third grade, for example, a belief in powerful others as causes of school success and failure undermines children’s engagement. However, by the seventh grade, the aspect of perceived control most detrimental to engagement changes to low perceptions of ability. As these mediators change, the aspects of the social context that are central predictors of motivation change as well. Corresponding to beliefs in powerful others, the primary predictor of the development of engagement in third grade is interactions with teachers (specifically the provision of structure and involvement). By seventh grade, however, when perceived ability is the primary regulator of motivation, children’s own academic performance becomes a more central predictor of motivation in school. In sum, the assumption that the child, the social context, and the mechanisms that connect them change with age can set the stage for a more detailed empirical examination of how these developmental shifts may unfold.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to suggest strategies that may aid researchers in the exploration of the social factors that contribute to children’s motivation. Three general principles, as well as past research on the topic, have been used as a basis for these suggestions. Taken together, they paint a picture of children who are active participants in the social interactions that shape their motivation. Children can be seen as initiating, interpreting, and provoking interactions with social partners. A strong theoretical perspective on how these interpretations (e.g., experiences of self-determination or helplessness) influence children’s motivation then allows researchers to move “backward” to an identification of the broad dimensions of social interactions (i.e., autonomy support or chaos) that are likely to influence children’s interpretations. As a next step, researchers can try to analyze the multiple pathways through which social partners – and other aspects of the social context, such as rules, materials, and assigned tasks – may communicate these dimensions to children.

As researchers take each of these steps, their increasing awareness of the possibility that these processes are developmental can lead them to expand their research programs in several directions. They may continue to investigate the developmental antecedents of individual differences in children’s style of interpreting social interactions. They may explore how normative developments in children’s processing of motivationally relevant information could change with age. They may study age differences in how chil-
dren experience communications of motivational supports (such as warmth and freedom). They may analyze how normative changes in children’s treatment by schools and parents have an impact on children’s motivation. They may examine whether the mechanisms that connect social context and child motivation themselves develop.

The exciting research programs described in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 indicate that results in many of these areas of study will soon be forthcoming. I would like to end my commentary by suggesting that the focus on social contributors to motivation also points the way to a new challenge in this area: a focus on the social contributors to these social contributors. When some sort of catalog of the social factors that shape children’s motivation has been assembled, researchers will be able to provide parents and teachers with a rough map of the pathways through which they can support children’s motivation.

However, researchers will then want to know how they can support parents and teachers in their efforts to support children. Why do some teachers support autonomy? Why are some parents chaotic? Why do some teachers stereotype children by race and by sex? How do some parents manage to magnify their children’s strengths and still compensate for their weaknesses? Many theories assume that the prime determinant of parent or teacher style of interaction with children is the personality of the parent or teacher. Many interventions assume that parents and teachers lack knowledge, and that once informed of the results of research, they will be better able to provide motivationally friendly environments. Some developmental theories even assume that adults are doomed to recapitulate their own childhoods. However, it seems unlikely that the complex interplay that characterizes children in their attempts to interact successfully and satisfyingly with their social partners will turn out to be any less complex when the target is parents or teachers. Perhaps some of the general principles espoused in this chapter—about active individuals, complex contexts, and developmental change—may be useful in charting the new territory in this area of research.

References


