Achievement, Affiliation, and Group Incentives: A Test of the Overmotivation Hypothesis

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The theory of achievement motivation (Atkinson & Raynor, 1974) is seen as an important starting point for making theoretical predictions regarding the interaction of personality and situational determinants on group processes. However, progress in this direction has been slow, possibly because group situations may lead to overmotivation. Here, persons who might be expected to excel in such situations (e.g., success-oriented persons also high in affiliation motivation) may actually perform poorly as a function of being too positively motivated. The present study is an attempt to find a priori evidence for the overmotivation hypothesis in order to facilitate progress toward a motivational theory of group activity. Male and female subjects were run in either an individual or a cooperative performance situation. The achievement, affiliative, and extrinsic incentives in these situations were examined in conjunction with relevant personality dimensions. The results lend support to the overmotivation hypothesis. Implications for group activity are discussed.

A major problem for testing predictions from the theory of achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1964; Atkinson & Feather, 1966) has been that the role of extrinsic incentives (e.g., affiliation, power, money) in affecting

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performance is not well understood. Atkinson and Reitman (1956), for example, demonstrated that where incentives other than achievement are present, characteristic differences due to achievement-related motives (i.e., success-oriented persons have higher performance scores than failure-threatened persons) tend to disappear. As the strength of extrinsic tendencies increases, differences due to resultant achievement motive are masked by such tendencies. These other tendencies may be so strong that, according to Atkinson and Reitman (1956, p. 363), the best situation for testing predictions is one where a subject is left alone in a room and the experimenter leaves after assigning the subject the task! Even where the theory has been elaborated to incorporate the relevance of future goals to the immediate achievement-oriented activity (Raynor, 1969, 1974), the elaboration applies only to nonextrinsic incentive situations (Raynor, 1974, p. 374).

Although one might be able to explain negative results in terms of extrinsic incentives, such an approach is not conducive to generalizing the theory to situations where extrinsic incentives are available. This is important, given that many everyday achievement-oriented situations consist of group performance situations. In addition, many social psychological process, such as leadership, conformity, social influence, and group effectiveness, might be more clearly understood if one were able to investigate predictions from the theory of achievement motivation expanded to include the role of extrinsic incentives (see Sorrentino, 1974).

OVERMOTIVATION

A critical problem for such an attempt is the possibility of overmotivation, where too much positive motivation leads to a performance decrement. Sorrentino (1973, 1974), for example, demonstrated that where affiliation motivation is systematically varied in group activity, differences due to achievement-related motives will affect the behavioral determinants of emergent leadership. Directional predictions concerning who was likely to emerge as leader, however, were only partially supported. Success-oriented persons high in affiliation motivation demonstrated leadership characteristics in a condition where the opportunity to move on to future achievement-oriented activity was not contingent upon performance at the immediate activity (noncontingent condition). However, they were least likely to demonstrate such characteristics in the contingent condition, where the opportunity to continue with achievement-oriented activity was contingent upon success at the immediate activity. Here they should have been even more positively motivated and exhibited even stronger leadership characteristics (see Raynor, 1974). Instead, failure-threatened persons high in affiliation