

Six Motivational Reasons for Low School Achievement

Steven Reiss

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Abstract Reiss (The normal personality: a new way of thinking about people. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008) empirically derived a reliable and valid taxonomy of 16 life motives (“psychological needs”). The model suggests six motivational reasons for low achievement in school. Low achievement may be motivated by fear of failure (high need for acceptance), incuriosity (low need for cognition), lack of ambition (low need for power), spontaneity (low need for order), lack of responsibility (low need for honor), and combativeness (high need for vengeance). For junior and senior high school students, the Reiss School Motivation Profile provides a standardized assessment of the six motivational forces. Each motive for low achievement has different implications for intervention.

Keywords Motivation · School

Certain goals are common to the human species such as food, companionship, safety, and independence. At the dawn of scientific psychology, James (1950/1890) and McDougall (1926), and later Murray (1938), put forth theories based on the construct of universal goals, also called psychological needs. Unfortunately, these researchers did not provide a scientifically valid taxonomy of psychological needs, and they relied almost entirely on controversial assessment methods called projective techniques (Zubin et al. 1965). Further, these theorists did a poor job of applying psychological needs to practical issues.

For more than a decade, my colleagues and I have been working to revive interest in psychological needs while addressing the shortcomings of previous works. We strengthened the conceptual analysis of universal motives, focusing on stable individual differences in priorities, individual differences in satiation rates, and motivational sensitivities

S. Reiss
Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

S. Reiss (✉)
868 Cherryfield Avenue, Columbus, OH 43235, USA
e-mail: sreiss0410@yahoo.com

(e.g., Reiss 2004a). We introduced the construct of life motivation to replace the prior construct of psychological need (Reiss 2008). As shown in Table 1, we empirically derived a reliable and valid taxonomy of 16 life motives (Reiss and Havercamp 1998).

One recent development in life motivation theory has been creative applications to practical activities. The 16 life motives have been applied to business coaching (Ion and Brand 2009), spirituality (Reiss 2004b), intellectual disabilities (Reiss and Reiss 2004), relationships (Judah 2006), sports psychology (Reiss et al. 2001), and media psychology (Reiss and Wiltz 2004).

In this article I put forth an original analysis of what motivates low academic achievement. Mandel and Marcus (1995) concluded that, “Underachievers are, in fact, highly motivated—in directions other than getting good grades. And finding out precisely where their motivation lies is the key to helping them turn around and become achievers at school” (p. 3). We will consider six life motives that suggest precisely what motivates students in schools.

The 16 life motives, which have been validated in peer reviewed research (Reiss 2008), have been applied in about 50 public schools for a variety of purposes including assessing motivational causes of poor grades. The apparent success of these applications is anecdotal and not scientific. Therefore, we propose the following model of six motivational causes of poor grades to stimulate new directions for scientific research on motivation in schools.

Reiss Motivation Profile (RMP) Assessment of 16 Life Motives

The RMP (Reiss and Havercamp 1998) is a standardized questionnaire that assesses the 16 life motives listed in Table 1. The RMP was empirically derived based on a series of six factor studies with participants from different walks in life and living in diverse geographical locations ($N = 2,032$). Four studies were “exploratory” factor analyses and two were “confirmatory” factor studies (Reiss and Havercamp 1998; Havercamp and Reiss 2003).

Table 1 The 16 RMP life motives

Acceptance	The life motive for approval
Curiosity	The life motive for cognition
Eating ^a	The life motive for food
Family	The life motive for family
Honor	The life motive for moral character
Idealism	The life motive to improve society
Independence	The life motive for self-reliance
Order	The life motive for organization
Physical activity	The life motive for muscle exercise
Power	The life motive for influence
Romance ^a	The life motive for sex
Saving ^a	The life motive to collect
Social contact	The life motive for peer companionship
Status	The life motive for social standing
Tranquility	The life motive for emotional calm
Vengeance	The life motive to confront those who offend

^a Not included in RSMP/school version

Reiss (2008) summarized the results of 17 studies evaluating the reliability, social desirability, and validity of each of the RMP's 16 life motives. The instrument's reliability is comparable or slightly superior to that found for other comprehensive personality assessments (Havercamp and Reiss 2003). The social desirability of the items is minimal (Havercamp and Reiss 2003). Concurrent or criterion validity has been demonstrated for each life motive scale except Romance. Professionals have used the RMP with many thousands of counseling and coaching clients worldwide.

The Reiss School Motivation Profile (RSMP) is a standardized questionnaire consisting of 13 of the 16 RMP scales—that is, all except romance (sex), saving, and eating. These three scales were deleted to avoid controversies over asking students about sex or money and to shorten the overall length of the instrument for use with adolescents.

The results of the RSMP provide a standardized score indicating the strength of 13 life motives. The standardized scores are interpreted in terms of “high,” “low,” and “average” motivation. A student is said to score “high” for a life motive when his or her score is 0.8 SD or higher than the RSMP norm. Conversely, a student is said to score “low” for a life motive when his or her score is 0.8 SD or lower than the RSMP norm. RSMP standard scores between -0.8 and $+0.8$ standard deviations indicate “average” life motivation. According to Reiss's (2008) model, high and low standard scores have significant implications for behavior in real-world environments, whereas average standard scores have minimal practical significance.

Six Reasons for Underachievement

The RSMP may be used to assess the following six common motivational reasons for low achievement in school.

Reason No. 1: Fear of Failure (High Scores on RSMP Acceptance Scale)

Since failure hurts less when students do not try, students with high fear of failure show inconsistent effort and, thus, underachieve (e. g., Atkinson and Feather 1966; Hill 1972). These students may try hard on easy tasks but not when challenged. When teachers or parents criticize them, they may not hear what the teacher or parent is saying.

High standard scores on the RSMP Acceptance scale suggest an above-average fear of failure. In research studies, the RSMP Acceptance scale was positively correlated with “Big 5” Neuroticism, $r = .50$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Webber 2004) and with Negative Affect, $r = .46$, $p < .01$, but negatively correlated with the Purpose in Life scale, $r = -.29$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Chapin 2007). These findings provided peer-reviewed scientific evidence for the concurrent and criterion validity of the RSMP Acceptance scale.

A considerable number of students referred to school psychologists may have a high need for RSMP Acceptance, indicating fear of failure and self-esteem issues. Pending the results of additional evaluation, a high standard score for RSMP Acceptance is sometimes an indicator of psychiatric disorder. A low standard score for RSMP Acceptance is consistent with mental health and often a contra-indicator for psychiatric disorder.

Students with high RSMP Acceptance scores may be at their best when parents and teachers stand behind and encourage them. They do poorly when criticized, yelled at, or evaluated. After they graduate from school, they may play life to avoid failure rather than to experience success.

Reason No. 2: Incuriosity (Low Scores on RSMP Curiosity Scale)

The 16 life motives provide a basis for distinguishing two kinds of curiosity (Reiss 2008), which are largely unrelated. Intellectual curiosity (also called need for cognition; Cacioppo et al. 1996) motivates thinking and valuation of ideas. Exploratory curiosity motivates interest in novel stimuli and is inhibited by fear of the unknown. On the RSMP, high standard scores on the Curiosity scale assess intellectual curiosity, whereas low standard scores on Tranquility and Acceptance assess exploratory curiosity.

On the RSMP, incurious students dislike having to think. As one middle school student with low RSMP curiosity wondered, “Why cannot they invent a pill I could take when I need to know something?” Many students with low RSMP Curiosity scores are bored with traditional school curricula and intellectual activities.

The RSMP Curiosity scale is significantly correlated with intrinsic motivation, $r = .54$ (Olson and Chapin 2007), and with Positive Affect, $r = .26$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Chapin 2007). Compared with a group of 737 people from diverse walks in life, a group of 52 college philosophy majors scored very high for RSMP Curiosity, $t(787) = 7.20$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.06$ (Havercamp and Reiss 2003). Further, 19 of 49 (38.8%) low-achieving students scored at least .8 SD below the RSMP norm for Curiosity, compared with only four of 49 (8.1%) who scored at least .8 SD above the RSMP norm for Curiosity (Kavanaugh and Reiss 2002, unpublished data). These findings provide support for the criterion validity of the RSMP Curiosity scale.

Incurious students may be at their best when teachers break down the material into small bites. They may respond to opportunities for frequent rests from learning experiences. They may respond to practical learning experiences: teachers should minimize emphasis on ideas and instead make salient the practical relevance of the curriculum.

Reason No. 3: Lack of Ambition (Low Scores on RSMP Power Scale)

Many experts suggested that competence motivation is associated with achievement (White 1959). On the RSMP, competence motivation falls under the need for power. (On the RSMP, power often can be thought of as *willpower*). High RSMP Power standard scores suggest a hardworking individual, whereas low standard scores suggest someone who is nondirective and laid back. RSMP Power scores are positively correlated with the Personality Research Form Dominance scale, $r = .55$, $p < .01$ (Havercamp and Reiss 2003) and with Big 5 Extraversion, $r = .39$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Webber 2004). These findings provide evidence for the concurrent validity of the RSMP Power scale.

Students with low RSMP Power scores do not apply themselves. They set modest goals and avoid challenging courses because they do not want to work hard. Non-ambitious students who are smart still may earn average or even above average grades, but only when they can do so without working hard. The students value good grades but devalue persistent effort.

These students may be willing to work at a moderate pace but no harder. When pushed to work hard, they may quit. These students may want to avoid the most challenging courses, but they may do well in moderately challenging courses. What is “challenging” or “moderately challenging,” of course, depends on the student’s potential. After graduation, these individuals may continue to avoid hard work and, thus, underachieve in their career.

Reason No. 4: Spontaneity (Low Scores on RSMP Order Scale)

Students who value spontaneity tend to be disorganized and unprepared. They tend to have too many balls in the air, starting a new activity before they finish the current activity. Some teachers mark down disorganized students for carelessness, inattentiveness to detail, and sloppiness.

On the RSMP, need for spontaneity falls under a low need for order. High RSMP standard scores for order theoretically suggest the traits of an organized person, whereas low standard scores theoretically suggest the traits of a spontaneous person. The RSMP Order scale is positively correlated with the Personality Research Form Order scale, $r = .60$, $p < .01$ (Havercamp and Reiss 2003). This finding provides evidence for the concurrent validity of the RSMP Order scale.

Students with low RSMP Order need to learn to stay focused on a single course of action, completing one task before moving on to the next. Some spontaneous students think they are impressing teachers by working on multiple projects, when in reality the teachers are thinking they are too scattered to do any one job well. These students are at their best on unstructured tasks and in loosely organized environments.

Reason No. 5: Lack of Responsibility (Low Scores on RSMP Honor Scale)

Students with character problems underachieve when they are caught cheating, shirk their duties (e.g., do not do homework), or when teachers mark them down for character shortcomings. The RSMP Honor scale has eight items assessing valuation of traditional ethics and morals. High standard scores suggest the traits of a responsible student, whereas low standard scores suggest the traits of an opportunist.

The RSMP Honor scale is positively correlated with Big 5 Conscientiousness, $r = .31$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Webber 2004); Purpose in Life, $r = .33$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Chapin 2007); and Positive Affect, $r = .20$, $p < .05$ (Olson and Chapin 2007). In a sample of 49 low achieving high school students, 21 of 49 (42.9 percent) had significantly below average RSMP scores for honor. These findings provide evidence for the concurrent validity of the RSMP Honor scale.

Students with low scores for RSMP Honor are expedient and may take advantages of opportunities without letting prior commitments or ethics get in their way. They see nothing wrong in breaking promises when better opportunities come along. Opportunism can lead to personal gains in the short run, but in the long run expedient people are marked down when others realize their ethical lapses.

These students may need teachers to impose externally strict ethical limits. They need to learn that their teachers and parents are not going to let them get away with anything and that people who cheat are very likely to get caught eventually. They will play by the rules when it is to their advantage to do so, but left to themselves they will cheat.

Reason No. 6: Combativeness (High Scores on RSMP Vengeance Scale)

Combative behavior is an important cause of underachievement throughout life. These individuals make enemies of potential friends. Combative school children get into fights on the playground, school cafeteria, school hallways, or even in the classroom itself (Mandel 1997). The RSMP Vengeance scale consists of eight items that assess aggressive and competitive behavior. High standard scores theoretically suggest a predisposition toward confrontation, whereas low standard scores theoretically suggest a predisposition to avoid

conflict. RSMP Vengeance scores are positively correlated with Big 5 Neuroticism, $r = .31$, $p < .05$ (Olson and Webber 2004) and with Negative Affect, $r = .34$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Chapin 2007), and are negatively correlated with Big 5 Agreeableness (Olson and Webber 2004), $r = -.61$, $p < .01$, and with Purpose in Life, $r = -.32$, $p < .01$ (Olson and Chapin 2007). These findings provide evidence for the concurrent validity of the RSMP Vengeance scale.

These students may be at their best in competitive situations. Careers that reward competitiveness include sports, military life, and business. When a student is inappropriately combative, parents and counselors should teach the difference between socially appropriate competition and inappropriate or excessive confrontation or aggression. Some (not all) students with high RSMP Vengeance scores have anger management issues.

Conclusion

The six motivational reasons for low achievement in schools are best considered as an original theory intended to stimulate new research on the motivational basis of poor academic achievement. The model implies that low achievers are strongly motivated in directions other than school. To date, the model is supported by factor analytic studies and studies of concurrent and criterion validity for each of the RSMP scales. In professional practice, the RMP has been used with many thousands of clients in a variety of countries and cultures, whereas the RSMP (school version of the RMP) has been used in about 50 middle school and high schools. Although much more research is needed, thus far the model appears to be promising and unusually accurate in pinpointing exactly what is motivating poor school performances.

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