

A Theological Extension of Self-Efficacy: Academic Implications

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Abstract

Research indicates a positive correlation between self-efficacy and increased student achievement. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief that they can exercise control over their functioning. Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Experiences, Social Persuasion and the Physiological well-being of an individual, are components of self-efficacy. This paper extends the traditional view of self-efficacy by introducing another component that effects the motivating factors within an individual. Through theological experiences, individuals in a Christian context utilize faith-based principles to access mastery, vicarious experiences, social support and physiological well-being. Through theological experiences, mastery experiences are acquired with God's help; vicarious experiences are extended to a global Christian context, Social persuasion occurs through scriptures and testimonies, and physiological well-being is taught and supported via God and His Word (scripture). This theological extension has implications in academia, mental health, leadership and policy articulation.

Keywords

Self Efficacy, Bandura, Student Achievement, Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Experiences, Social Persuasion, Physiological Well-Being, Theology, Bible, Faith Based, Christian

1. Introduction

Psychologist Albert Bandura developed the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capability to exercise control over their own functioning (Bandura, 1977). An individual with high self-efficacy is more likely to believe that they will master a new task and will exemplify a higher level of effort (Cherry, 2022; Huang, Mayer, & Usher, 2020). A self-efficacious person believes that if they work hard, then they will accomplish a task. Self-efficacy is realized through the following:

1) **Mastery Experiences:** This is based on an individual mastering a task in the past. For example, a student that has experienced success in their mathematics classes in the past is more likely to believe that they will experience success in a new math class. Similarly, a student that has experienced failure and/or non-productive struggle in math in the past is more likely to believe that they will experience failure and/or nonproductive struggle in a new math class.

2) **Vicarious Experiences:** These experiences are based on seeing others “like you” succeed at a task. The others “like you” tend to be those that are similar in age, race, and social group. This may represent the student’s friends or siblings unless the other individual is perceived to have a “special” gifting or academic prowess. Vicarious experiences are particularly limiting for individuals from underrepresented groups who aspire to pursue STEM careers. With a limited number of individuals pursuing STEM careers and a limited number of role models from underrepresented groups, students from underrepresented groups have limited access to “seeing” others “like them”.

3) **Social Persuasion:** This occurs when an individual receives positive feedback that instills within them that they can accomplish a task. This happens in schools when someone with academic credibility (ex., Algebra Teacher) tells a student that: they have a high aptitude in mathematics, they have strong analytical skills or that they “think and process” mathematically. Since the teacher has both education and experience in knowing and recognizing mathematical thought processes, social persuasion is a powerful tool for building self-efficacy within students. Social persuasion can also come from parents, friends or individuals within the students’ social circle that can positively affirm them. Similarly, negative feedback has the opposite effect and can potentially convince the student that they cannot achieve, accomplish or thrive.

4) **Physiological:** “The emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of a person can influence how they feel about their personal abilities in a particular situation.” (Bandura, 1977). According to Maslow, regardless of the academic aptitude of a student, emotional, physical, and psychological needs must be met before students can engage their (academic) abilities and live at their highest potential of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

The objective of this paper is to extend the traditional view of self-efficacy by introducing another (Theological) experience that effects the motivating factors within an individual. Components of the Theological Extension will be presented. The sub-objectives of the paper will address how the theological perspective extends the concepts of mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social support and physiological well-being.

2. Mastery Experiences or Experiences with the Master

Mastery experiences occur when a person has experienced success in an endeavor in the past. Successful math students will tend to believe that they will continue to be successful in math. Similarly, if a student fails a math class, they may believe that they will perform poorly in all future Math classes. The lack of per-

formance mastery in Mathematics may cause the student to avoid all careers that require mathematics. Due to their lack of mastery in Mathematics, they may have low mathematics self-efficacy. Hence, they may believe that regardless of how hard they work, they will still perform poorly in mathematics. With the concept of self-efficacy, the ability to master a skill or concept solely lies within the individual. The students are limited to what their minds can process, analyze and master.

In his letter to the church at Phillipi, Paul the Apostle wrote, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (King James Bible, n.d.e: [Philippians Chapter 4 KJV](#)). A foundational tenant within Christianity is the belief that believers are helped by the Holy Spirit (Parakletos). This help allows the believer to go beyond the things that they could otherwise do within their own ability or strength. This help or power is accessed through fellowship with God according to His divine will. Mastery experiences then become events that occur not because of what the individual solely can accomplish but because they have (and can access) help from God. This view extends the individual’s capacity to acquire new knowledge and conquer new tasks because according to (King James Bible, n.d.f: [Psalms Chapter 121 KJV](#)) “(A Song of degrees.) I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth” (King James Bible, n.d.f: [Psalms Chapter 121 KJV](#)).

The Theological perspective does not remove the necessary components of work and perseverance but it does remove the limiting barrier of the inability to learn a concept. It opens individual’s minds to the unlimited possibilities of learning and growing.

The Word of God is replete with promises concerning victory, peace and blessings. Through fellowship and prayer, the believer lives a victorious life. Mastering life’s challenges occur not through the individual’s strength but through faith and the power of God’s Word.

Exodus 35 records a story of two men that were filled with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship. The two men were Bezaleel and Oholiab.

Then Moses told the people of Israel, “The Lord has specifically chosen Bezaleel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. The Lord has filled Bezaleel with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, ability, and expertise in all kinds of crafts. He is a master craftsman, an expert in working with gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in engraving and mounting gemstones and in carving wood. He is a master at every craft. And the Lord has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach their skills to others. The Lord has given them special skills as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple, and scarlet thread on fine linen cloth, and weavers. They excel as craftsmen and as designers. (Bible Gateway, n.d.: [Exodus 35 NLT](#)).

The believer can then ask for help, wisdom and understanding. “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall

your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (King James Bible, n.d.d: Matthew Chapter 7 KJV).

3. Vicarious Experiences: Those Like Me

Vicarious experiences are, “experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person” (Dictionary.com). These experiences occur when an individual sees someone “like them” succeeding at a task. The individual then concurs that they will be successful at the same or a similar task. Unfortunately, individuals from underrepresented groups, may not “see” others that “look” like them in careers related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). This limits their access to increasing self-efficacy through vicarious experiences. Per the National Science Foundation’s Indicators, “Blacks or African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, and American Indians or Alaska Natives represent 30% of the employed U.S. population; however they represent 23% of the STEM workforce due to underrepresentation of these groups among STEM workers with a bachelor’s degree or higher.” Underrepresented groups traditionally do not pursue STEM fields. The same applies to women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women represented 50% of the US population but only 27% of the U.S. STEM workforce (Martinez & Christnacht, 2021).

According to Matthew—“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (King James Bible, n.d.c: Matthew Chapter 12 KJV). The notions of God as our heavenly father and having brothers and sisters in Christ expand our circle of who is “like us”. This extends the believer’s view of likeness from gender, race and SES status to belief system. Race, gender and age discrimination, place boundaries and classifications on groups. Who is “like you”? What are the stereotypical attitudes towards people “like you”? A student’s self-efficacy is potentially diminished when they aspire to step outside of traditional, stereotypical norms. They are viewed as a trailblazer, the first of their kind or a pioneer. They then carry the responsibility of both academic load and representative for “their kind”.

Within Christianity, your family members or those “like you”, go beyond your biological brothers and sisters to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Those “like you” tell of the blessings, and goodness of God. This is the power of the Christian testimony. In Mark 5:19, Jesus said, “...Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord have done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.” (King James Bible, n.d.b: Mark Chapter 5 KJV).

Hearing and gleaning from the testimonies of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ strengthens the believer’s faith. They can now pray to their heavenly father for wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to accomplish a task. They can ask for help, guidance and enlightenment. Moreover, they can receive the newness of the experience. Isaiah 43:19 states, “Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.” (King James Bible, n.d.a: Isaiah Chapter 43 KJV).

A traditional view of vicarious experiences limits an individual to their perceived “world”. With a global view, their world is extended even further to souls worldwide. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” (King James Bible, 2019: Psalms Chapter 24 KJV).

4. Social Persuasion

Social Persuasion involves receiving positive feedback that instills within an individual that they can accomplish a task. For students, the task may be a specific assignment or as broad as graduating from high school. Unfortunately, the messages directed to Black students are not positive. According to USA Facts, “During the 2017-2018 school years, Black students made up 15% of student enrollment, but were expelled more than twice their enrollment numbers: 39%.” (USA Facts, 2021). Social Persuasion can be a powerful force, yet many students do not get the needed positive support. Some students have a network of support or at least one individual that encourages them. For the students that are not supported, self-efficacy must be built up through mastery or vicarious experiences. Hence, social persuasion is limited by a student’s environment. In a supportive environment, social persuasion is an uplifting force. In a dysfunctional, combative environment, a student, instead of receiving positive feedback, will receive negative feedback.

The theological perspective reverses the conversation. Instead of allowing your environment to speak to you, God’s Word speaks into your environment. This viewpoint does not require that you wait for someone to encourage or uplift you. The Word of God is replete with encouraging and empowering words to address every situation. Instead of looking to man for encouragement, an encouraging Word is a scripture away.

5. Physiological

“The emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of a person can influence how they feel about their personal abilities in a particular situation.” (Bandura, 1977). Self-perceptions regarding personal abilities can be affected by an individual’s physical, mental or emotional state. Hence, a person may lack motivation if they are hungry, stressed or depressed. Hindering physiological factors can influence motivation, productivity and academic growth. To combat the effect that hunger has on school-aged children, many schools offer free and reduced meals. According to the Economic Research Service USDA, “in FY 2021, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provided 2.2 billion meals, 98.9 percent of which were served free or at a reduced price.” (USDA ERS, n.d.). In addition to the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, many students struggle with mental and emotional problems. According to The National Center for Educational Statistics, “among children under 18 years old in the United States, approximately 16.5 percent had at least one mental health disorder. Of these children, about 49.4 percent did not receive needed treatment or counseling from a mental health professional (Whitney & Peterson, 2019).” The physiological component identifies several constructs that potentially affect self-efficacy but does not provide

the tools to mitigate some or all of its negative effects. The theological perspective provides support for addressing emotional, psychological (physiological) related issues. “He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.” (King James Bible, n.d.g: Psalms Chapter 91 KJV).

Table 1 provides the components of self-efficacy and how they are viewed through a theological contrast lens. The source of motivation and information on how the construct works is included. According to an average of all 2021 Gallup polling, “about three in four Americans said they identify with a specific religious faith. By far the largest proportion, 69% identify with a Christian religion, including 35% who are Protestant, 22% Catholic and 12% who identify with another Christian religion or simply as a “Christian” (Jones, 2021). There are approximately 330 million residents in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Since 69% identify themselves with a Christian religion, the proposed theological extension of self-efficacy potentially impacts 228 million Americans and numerous Christian faith-based individuals worldwide.

Table 1. A theological extension of self-efficacy.

Bandura	Source of Motivation	How does it work?	Measurement/Scale	Theological Contrast
Mastery Experiences	Within the Individual	Requires past mastery experiences	High (repeated success) to Low (minimal success)	Mastery Experiences are acquired by the individual with God’s help
Vicarious Experiences	Others “like” the individual	Requires someone “like you” performing the task	High (strong example/mentor) to Low (limited example/mentor)	“Like” in the theological sense is extended to a global context. Support is through scriptures, testimonies...
Social Persuasion	Outside positive feedback	Requires positive feedback or support	High (strongly encouraged) to Low (minimally encouraged or discouraged)	Positive support and encouragement is provided via God and His Word (scripture)
Physiological	Within the Individual—Mind, body and emotions	Requires basic mind, body emotional needs are met	High (physiological needs met) to Low (lacks physical, mental, or emotional well-being needed for learning)	Support for the emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of a person is provided through faith via God and His Word (scripture)
Theological Extension				
Theological	Outside the individual—The source is God and His Word (Scripture)	Requires faith in God and the study and receiving of His Word (scripture)	High (faithfully receives/utilizes scriptures for success, support, and physiological needs) to Low (minimally or does not use scriptures for support system)	

6. Conclusion

Research supports the benefits of self-efficacy; however, for faith-based individuals, self-efficacy alone does not fully explain their source of motivation. Since approximately 228 million Americans are Christians, a theological perspective must be included in the literature. The academic implications of the theological perspective include utilizing the source of motivation to promote self-efficacy. For the Mastery, Vicarious, Social and Physiological components, this might include studying/applying scriptural references, faith and prayer when approaching academic endeavors. This perspective has implications for curriculum development, classroom instruction, counseling, classroom management, educational leadership and public policy.

The theological perspective can potentially advance knowledge in the field of educator professional development by providing a perspective to train and support pre-service and in-service teachers, content specialists and educational leaders. In addition, it can potentially inform college/university teacher preparation programs, school districts and state/federal entities.

With the separation of church and state, researchers and policy makers must find ways to access the motivational source inherent in approximately 228 million Americans to promote academic achievement.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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