



When first-generation students succeed at university: On the link between social class, academic performance, and performance-avoidance goals



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ABSTRACT

Past research has fully documented that at University, social-class background affects one's perception of his or her fitting in within the system. The present paper tests social class and academic performance as predictors of performance-avoidance goal endorsement (i.e., trying to avoid performing poorly) in a psychology university context. We argue that first-generation students are achieving an upward mobility – a process that is costly, especially for those closer to achieving it (i.e., high achievers). In three classroom context studies, students reported their performance-avoidance goals. Their previous academic achievements as well as their parental level of education were examined as predictors of these goals. The results of the three studies demonstrated that the higher their academic level, the more first-generation students endorsed performance-avoidance goals compared with continuing-generation students. The results are discussed with regard to the upward mobility process that these students are about to achieve.

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1. Introduction

University context is a competitive and selective environment where just trying to avoid failure is not the best strategy or the most optimal goal to pursue to achieve success (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002). Contrary to other types of achievement goals (i.e., mastery-based and performance approach goals) for which consequences are debated in the literature, research on performance-avoidance goals has led to a large consensus regarding their deleterious effects (Durik, Lovejoy, & Johnson, 2009; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011; Huang, 2012; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Murayama & Elliot, 2012; Van Yperen, Blaga, & Postmes, 2014). Despite the negative outcomes associated with performance-avoidance goals, several studies have shown that some students adopt these goals anyway (Smith, Sansone, & White, 2007; Van Yperen, 2006; Van Yperen, Hamstra, & Van der Klauw, 2011). The present research examines academic performance and social class as two characteristics potentially associated with performance-avoidance goals adoption.

1.1. Performance-avoidance goals

1.1.1. Definition

The achievement goal construct was developed in the early 1980s. Several researchers, including Carol Dweck (1986) and John Nicholls (1984), defined two main types of achievement goals that students can pursue in an academic task: mastery goals, where the purpose is to develop competence and task mastery, and performance goals, where the purpose is to demonstrate competence relative to others. Later on, researchers incorporated the approach-avoidance distinction in the conceptualization of achievement goals. Notably, Elliot and McGregor (2001, see also Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) defined four different types of goals. In their model, mastery goals are divided into mastery-approach goals (focus on task-based attainment) and mastery-avoidance goals (avoidance of task-based incompetence), whereas performance goals are divided into performance-approach goals and performance-avoidance goals. Performance-approach goals focus on the attainment of positive outcomes and the demonstration of superiority relative to others whereas performance-avoidance goals focus on avoiding the demonstration of inferior competence.

1.1.2. Performance-avoidance goal endorsement and negative outcomes

Contrary to mastery and performance-approach goals, which are sometimes associated to positive outcomes and are often debated

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in the literature (e.g., Brophy, 2005; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002), the adoption of performance-avoidance goals has been consistently associated with several negative outcomes for university students. For instance, performance-avoidance goals are associated with low intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997), procrastination, perception of tasks as threats (McGregor & Elliot, 2002), disorganization, surface learning (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), low feedback seeking (Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007), and compliant forms of conflict regulation (Sommet et al., 2014). Pekrun, Elliot, and Maier (2006, 2009) also pointed out the link between performance-avoidance goals and negative emotions, like anxiety, hopelessness, and shame. Furthermore, the adoption of performance-avoidance goals negatively predicts academic grades (Darnon, Butera, Mugny, Quiamzade, & Hulleman, 2009a; Durik et al., 2009; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Huang, 2012; Hulleman et al., 2010; Murayama & Elliot, 2012; Payne et al., 2007).

Because of the negative consequences associated with performance-avoidance goals, researchers and educators alike agree that these goals should be banned from classrooms. University-level teachers do not promote performance-avoidance goals in their classes, and students are aware that these goals are not optimal for reaching academic success (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009b). Thus, students should not pursue performance-avoidance goals. However, several studies have shown that despite the negative outcomes associated with this construct and teachers' recommendations, some students seem to adopt performance-avoidance goals anyway (Smith et al., 2007; Van Yperen, 2006; Van Yperen et al., 2011). Are some groups of students particularly prone to adopt these goals?

1.1.3. Individual antecedents of performance-avoidance goals

Several individual, person-focused antecedents of performance-avoidance goals have been reported. For example, fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Murayama, 2008), fixed beliefs about intelligence (Dinger & Dickhäuser, 2013; Payne et al., 2007), and personality characteristics like neuroticism (Bipp, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2008; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Payne et al., 2007) or avoidance temperament (Elliot et al., 2011; Elliot & Thrash, 2010) have been identified as antecedents of performance-avoidance goal endorsement.

More importantly, research has highlighted that perceived competence is one of the strongest predictors of performance-avoidance goals among both teenagers and college students (Cury, Da Fonseca, Rufo, & Sarrazin, 2002; Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006; Elliot & Church, 1997; Pulfrey, Buchs, & Butera, 2011). For example, Elliot and Church (1997) found that college students with low competence expectancies are first oriented toward the possibility of failure and subsequently tend to adopt performance-avoidance goals (see also Cury et al., 2006). More recently, Pulfrey et al. (2011) confirmed that the higher an individual's perception of his or her competence to succeed in a system, the lower his or her performance-avoidance goal endorsement. Such result supports the findings suggesting that a high level of performance-avoidance goal adoption is often associated with a low level of self-efficacy (Deemer, 2010; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Payne et al., 2007). Other research has shown that actual academic achievement (e.g., GPA, early exam grade, or SAT scores) is also negatively associated with performance-avoidance goal endorsement (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Reis, 2003; Pulfrey et al., 2011; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). Thus, high academic achievers are usually less likely to endorse performance-avoidance goals compared with low achievers.

1.1.4. Beyond psychological antecedents: the role of sociocultural factors

In academic contexts, several types of information can be used to infer one's probability of success, including actual level of academic achievement and belonging to groups known to perform well

or poorly at a university (Fiske & Markus, 2012). Indeed, low social-class students suffer from a negative stereotype about their competence (Fiske, 2010; Russell & Fiske, 2010). Such negative stereotypic expectations for low social-class group members may have led some scholars (Elliot, 1999) to suggest that social class could act as an antecedent of performance-avoidance goal endorsement. Yet surprisingly, social class has thus far not been the object of much attention in the achievement goal field, which is a gap that has been recently highlighted in the literature (Darnon, Dompnier, & Poortvliet, 2012; Huang, 2012).

Related to this issue, it should be noted that some research has shown that cultural belonging influences students' achievement goals (i.e., Asian Americans are more likely to endorse performance-avoidance goals compared with Anglo Americans; Zusho, Pintrich, & Cortina, 2005; see also Zusho & Njoku, 2007). Since different social-class groups have different cultural mindsets (Williams, 2012), studying the influence of social-class on achievement goal endorsement represents another way to contribute to the "culturalization of educational psychology" (Zusho & Clayton, 2011). The present research aims to test whether social-class, like other cultural belongings, would influence performance-avoidance goal endorsement. However, unlike previous research, we consider that social class is only one part of the story and that its interplay with students' level of academic achievement, given the centrality of this latter variable in performance-avoidance goal endorsement, needs to be considered to obtain a comprehensive picture of this issue (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Reis, 2003; Pulfrey et al., 2011; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). The present research therefore examined whether an individual characteristic (i.e., one's level of academic achievement) interacts with social-class position (i.e., one's generational status) to predict psychology students' adoption of performance-avoidance goals.

1.2. Social class, academic achievement, and performance-avoidance goals

1.2.1. Generational status as an indicator of social class at university

Social class influences many life outcomes, including health (Gallo, de Los Monteros, & Shivpuri, 2009), feeding behaviors (Darnon & Drewnowski, 2008), and socio-cognitive tendencies (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), as well as university behaviors and outcomes. In particular, recent interest in the effects of social class at university indicates that first-generation students experience a cultural mismatch in university system, which in turn explains why they perform more poorly compared with continuing-generation students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012a; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012c). Moreover, first-generation students have been found to be less confident regarding their college success and their self-efficacy compared with continuing-generation students (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). These researches used generational status as an indicator of social class at university. Indeed, generational status is associated with success, academic fit, and responses to threat in university context (Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2012a, 2012c; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012b; see also Snibbe & Markus, 2005). It also outstrips other indicators of status (i.e., occupations or incomes) in predicting life consequences (Liberatos, Link, & Kelsey, 1988). Therefore, in the present series of studies, as in previous research in the area, generational status will be used to assess students' social class.

1.2.2. First-generation students and expectancies of success at university

First-generation students, more so than continuing-generation students, doubt their chances of success at university. For several

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