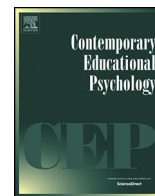




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Here today, gone tomorrow? Revisiting the stability of teachers' achievement goals



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ABSTRACT

Teachers' achievement goals are typically considered to be stable characteristics although there are arguments for both stability and instability. Empirical investigations regarding the stability of teachers' achievement goals are rare. In this study, we investigated the stability of teachers' achievement goals (i.e., learning, performance approach, performance avoidance, and work avoidance goals) using generalizability theory. The sample comprised 166 German mathematics teachers in academic-track secondary schools who completed self-report questionnaires three times over the course of one school year. The ratio of stable to unstable aspects of teachers' achievement goals varied between 2:1 and 4:1. The number of measurement points needed for a reliable measure of the trait aspects of achievement goals varied between one and three. The results underline the importance of advancing research on teachers' achievement goals both theoretically and methodologically.

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1. Introduction

Motivational characteristics are a powerful explanation for how and why people think and act as they do. Many researchers conceptualize motivational characteristics as dispositional characteristics of persons. One famous example is research on motive dispositions, i.e., habitual preferences for dealing with certain kinds of incentives (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2010). Several theories and models, however, also point to the influence of occasion-specific characteristics on actual motivation (e.g., model of adaptable learning, Boekaerts & Niemimirta, 2000; cognitive-motivational process model, Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 1998; for a general overview of the relationship between traits and states, see latent-state-trait theory, Steyer, Schmitt, & Eid, 1999).

In research on teacher motivation, achievement goals are seen as an important explanation for teachers' perceptions of the environment and for their actions (Butler, 2012; Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2011; Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011). It is usually assumed (e.g., Butler, 2007; Dresel, Fasching, Steuer, Nitsche, & Dickhäuser, 2013; Malmberg, 2008; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblov, & Schiefele, 2010) that these achievement goals can be seen as traits (as "goal orientations") and, therefore, are only influenced by occasion-specific characteristics to a limited degree. Teachers teach-

ing the same class in the same school should thus set themselves similar goals across several occasions, largely independent of situational circumstances. However, few investigations have tested this assumption empirically. Taking a contrary position regarding the stability of achievement goals, Elliot (2005) stated that the main difference between the achievement goal approach and the classical achievement motive is that the former has a more specific and contextual focus. Increasing our knowledge about the actual stability of teachers' achievement goals will facilitate the development of both an appropriate theoretical understanding of teachers' achievement goals and, subsequently, an adequate model of the construct. More concretely, knowledge about the stability of teachers' achievement goals is important for the following reasons: (a) It helps insure that investigations will capture the characteristics of interest in an appropriate way (e.g., choosing a cross-sectional versus a longitudinal design). (b) It points out how to construct adequate measurement instruments (e.g., general versus situation-based measurements). (c) It helps in the selection of appropriate research questions regarding the level of operationalization of the independent and dependent variables (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). If achievement goals are only stable to a small degree, effects on rather stable characteristics (e.g., teachers' content knowledge) are unlikely. However, if teachers' achievement goals are stable to a large degree, investigating the effect on variable characteristics (e.g., instructional behavior in specific situations) does not seem to be straightforward. (d) Additionally, knowledge about the stability of teachers' achievement goals is useful in deriving appropriate implications based on the results of investigations (see also Murphy

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& Alexander, 2000; Pintrich, 2000). The purpose of the study at hand is to shed light on this topic by investigating the stability of teachers' achievement goals as well as the number of measurement points necessary to reliably measure these goals across occasions.

1.1. Teachers' achievement goals: definition and relevance

Achievement goals explain how and why people behave the way they do in achievement settings (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Murayama, Elliot, & Friedman, 2012). Achievement goal theory differentiates between various goals. The achievement goals that are commonly distinguished when describing and explaining characteristics of teacher motivation are (a) learning goals (the teacher aims to increase his or her own competencies), (b) performance approach goals (the teacher aims to demonstrate high competencies), (c) performance avoidance goals (the teacher aims to avoid the impression of low competencies), and (d) work avoidance goals (the teacher aims to reduce his or her workload). Several studies have pointed out the relevance of teachers' achievement goals for the teaching profession, as they have revealed relationships between teachers' achievement goals and various teacher and teaching characteristics. Associations have been found, for example, between achievement goals and occupational burden or burn-out (Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2013; Retelsdorf et al., 2010; Tönjes & Dickhäuser, 2009), the perception of help-seeking as beneficial or threatening (Butler, 2007; Nitsche et al., 2011), participation in vocational training programs (Nitsche et al., 2013), aspects of instructional quality (Butler, 2012; Butler & Shibaz, 2008; Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011), and the goal structures teachers realize in their classrooms, i.e., the extent to which pursuing learning vs. performance goals for students is reinforced by the classroom environment (Butler, 2012; Dresel et al., 2013; Retelsdorf et al., 2010). In all of these studies, learning goals were positively correlated with variables that are considered to be beneficial (e.g., attending vocational training programs) and negatively correlated with variables that are regarded as adverse (e.g., burn-out). For performance avoidance goals as well as work avoidance goals the relationship pattern was, in most

cases, reversed. The results regarding the effects of performance approach goals were mixed (e.g., positive effects on teacher self-efficacy in a study by Nitsche et al., 2011; positive effects on the social reference norm in a study by Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011). Most of the relationships identified between teachers' achievement goals and other variables were small, some were moderate.

1.2. Teachers' achievement goals: stable characteristics?

Regarding the conceptualization of achievement goals, large differences can be found (for an overview, see Pintrich, 2000, and Maehr & Zusho, 2009; see also Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). According to some conceptions, achievement goals are assumed to be rather stable (e.g., Silva & Nicholls, 1993) whereas for other conceptions, they are assumed to be rather unstable (e.g., Elliott & Dweck, 1988). The differences regarding the assumed stability of achievement goals are important: The theoretical conception of achievement goals influences (a) how investigations concerning these goals are conducted (e.g., how many measurement points are used), (b) how they are measured (e.g., whether achievement goals are assessed with respect to specific situations), (c) what research questions are appropriate (e.g., whether it makes sense to investigate effects of achievement goals on stable outcomes), and (d) what implications are derived from the results of the investigations (Murphy & Alexander, 2000; Pintrich, 2000; for a similar argumentation regarding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, see Harter & Jackson, 1992).

Based on the considerations of Fryer and Elliot (2007) and Pintrich (2000), we developed a conceptual framework to explain why achievement goals, on the one hand, can be assumed to be stable but, on the other hand, are also assumed to be unstable (see Fig. 1). Fryer and Elliot (2007) and Pintrich (2000) do not differentiate between different achievement goals in their argumentation. This implies that differences in the stability of the goals are not expected. Additionally, no information is given regarding the expected magnitude of the stable and the unstable components of achievement goals.

Empirical investigations regarding the stability of achievement goals exist, first and foremost, for students' achievement goals (for an overview, see Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Pintrich, 2000). According to

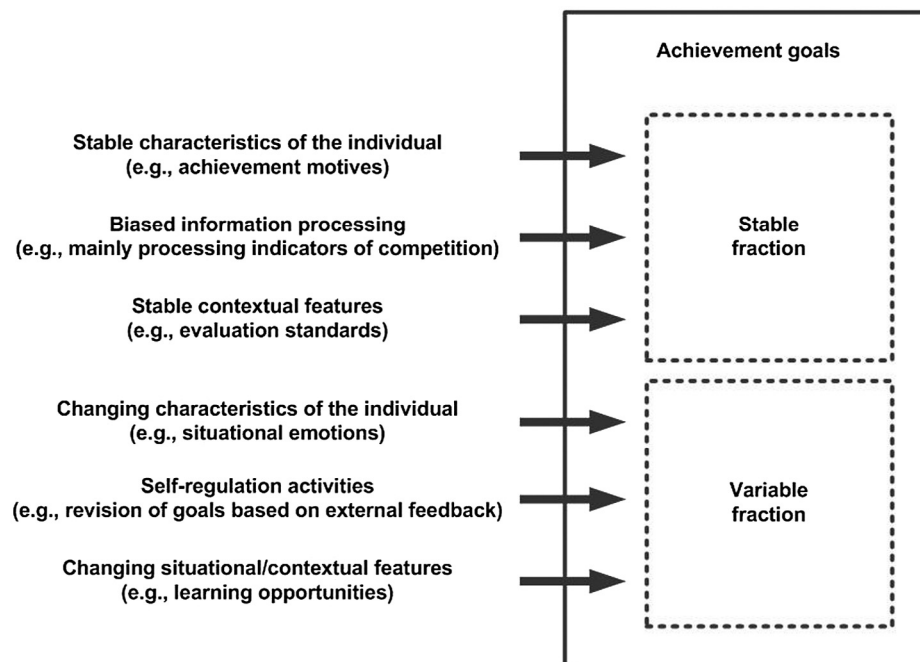


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for the stability of achievement goals.

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