The work avoidance goal construct: Examining its structure, antecedents, and consequences

Ronnel B. King [a,*], Dennis M. McInerney [b]

[a] Learning Sciences Laboratory, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
[b] Dept. of Special Education and Counselling, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Work avoidance goals have been relatively neglected in the literature with most research focusing on mastery and performance goals. The central aim of this study was to examine the structure, antecedents, and consequences of the work avoidance goal construct. Four studies were conducted. Study 1 investigated the construct validity of work avoidance, while Study 2 focused on its antecedents. Using a longitudinal panel design, Study 3 examined the impact of work avoidance—alongside mastery and performance goals—on engagement and achievement, while Study 4 explored its relationship to broader well-being outcomes. Results showed that work avoidance was distinct from mastery and performance goals. Entity theory of intelligence positively predicted work avoidance goal pursuit, while teacher and peer support buffered against it. Pursuing work avoidance goals was found to be associated with less engagement, lower grades, and greater negative affect. The impact of work avoidance on achievement and well-being outcomes seem to be more salient compared to the oft-examined mastery and performance goals. Implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Teachers sometimes encounter students who refuse to engage with the lessons and who want to minimize the amount of work they do. These students are typically portrayed as demotivated and are at risk for suboptimal learning outcomes. Educational psychologists have described these students as pursuing a work avoidance goal (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997; Nolen, 1988; Seifert & O' Keefe, 2001; Skaalvik, 1997; Wolters, 2003).

Despite the documented existence of work avoidance goals, this construct has only received limited research attention. Studies have been sporadic with most researchers focusing on mastery and performance goals. There is a dearth of knowledge on its construct validity. Not much is known about the factors that make students at-risk for pursuing work avoidance. Moreover, there is also a dearth of knowledge on its consequences not only on student learning but also on broader well-being outcomes.

A deeper understanding of work avoidance offers important theoretical and practical yields. Researchers have claimed that there are many types of goals that are salient in directing student behaviour; however, the bulk of goal research has been concentrated on mastery and performance goals (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Students live in a multi-goal environment. Thus, understanding work avoidance goals is important in moving beyond the nearly exclusive focus on mastery and performance goals in order to have a fuller understanding of motivational dynamics in the classroom. Moreover, research has suggested that mastery and performance goals may not be salient for low-achieving students who are neither interested in studying nor invested in competing with others (Elliot, 1999). These students may not be driven by the commonly-examined achievement goals. For these students, work avoidance goals may be more important for understanding their motivation or lack thereof. Considering that educators are interested in helping these low-achieving students perform better, understanding the antecedents and consequences of work avoidance goals may provide a possible foundation for the development of theoretically-driven intervention programs.

The aim of this study therefore was to examine the structure, antecedents, and consequences of work avoidance goals. Four studies were conducted to answer the following research questions: What is the structure of work avoidance goals and are they distinct from mastery and performance goals (Study 1)? What are the antecedents of work avoidance goals (Study 2)? What is the relationship of work avoidance goals to engagement, disaffection, and achievement (Study 3)? Do work avoidance goals influence broader well-being outcomes (Study 4)?

* Corresponding author. Address: Learning Sciences Laboratory, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, NIE5-B3-62, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616, Singapore.
E-mail address: ronnel.king@nie.edu.sg (R.B. King).

1.1. Achievement goals

Achievement goal theory proposes that student motivation can be understood by looking at the reasons or aims they adopt while engaged in academic work (Maehr & Zusho, 2009; see also Elliot, 2005 for a more constrained definition). At the core of the achievement goal construct is the notion of competence. Traditional achievement goal theory distinguished between mastery goals [also labeled as task-involved (Nicholls, 1984), task-focused (Maehr & Midgley, 1991), or learning goals (Elliot & Dweck, 1988)] and performance goals [also labeled as ego-involved (Nicholls, 1984) or ability-focused goals (Maehr & Midgley, 1991)]. Mastery and performance goals differ in terms of how competence is defined. Students who pursue mastery goals define competence through intrapersonal standards, while those who pursue performance goals define competence through normative comparisons with others.

Later, the valence dimension of competence was also added which led to a distinction between approach and avoidance dimensions (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Competence may be valenced in terms of whether it is focused on a positive possibility to approach (i.e., success) or a negative possibility to avoid (i.e., failure). Crossing the definition component of competence (mastery vs. performance) with the valence component (approach vs. avoidance) has resulted in the 2 × 2 achievement goal framework which posits four types of goals: (1) mastery-approach goal, which refers to wanting to achieve to gain new knowledge and improve one's competence; (2) performance-approach goal, which refers to wanting to achieve to outperform other students and demonstrate competence before others; (3) mastery-avoidance goal, which refers to wanting to avoid misunderstanding and the loss of one's skills; and (4) performance-avoidance goals, which refers to wanting to avoid showing incompetence relative to others.

1.2. Work avoidance goals

In contrast to achievement goals, students who pursue a work avoidance goal consistently avoid putting in an effort to do well, do only the minimum necessary to get by, and avoid challenging tasks. Elliot (1999) has argued that work avoidance is distinct from mastery and performance goals because it represents the absence of an achievement goal. For students who endorse a work avoidance goal, "success" is defined in terms of minimal work expenditure and not on any measure of competence.

Researchers have maintained a theoretical distinction between the more commonly examined mastery and performance goals and work avoidance goals (Elliot, 1999). However, empirical support for this distinction is weak. We found almost no extant study that explicitly tested the distinction of work avoidance goals from the 2 × 2 achievement goals using rigorous statistical methodologies such as confirmatory factor analyses. Most of the studies that tested the factor structure of work avoidance goals alongside mastery and performance relied heavily on exploratory factor analysis. For example, Skaalvik (1997) tested the factor structure of work avoidance goals alongside task orientation (similar to mastery goal), self-enhancing ego orientation (similar to performance-approach goal), and self-defeating ego orientation (similar to performance-avoidance goal) using exploratory factor analysis. Harackiewicz et al. (1997) conducted an exploratory factor analysis of items measuring mastery goals, performance goals, and work avoidance goals.

Another limitation of these studies was that the achievement goal measures they used were quite dated. Harackiewicz et al. (1997) used the dichotomous framework (mastery and performance goals) which does not include approach and avoidance distinctions. On the other hand, Skaalvik (1997) used the

trichotomous goal framework which does not include mastery avoidance goals. Note that the most recent revisions of achievement goal theory has recognized the superiority of the 2 × 2 achievement goal model which bifurcates both mastery and performance goals into their approach and avoidance components (Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Therefore, a study that tests the construct validity of work avoidance goals alongside the 2 × 2 achievement goals is needed.

1.3. Antecedents of goals

Due to the importance of goals for learning and achievement, numerous studies have explored the antecedents of various types of goals. One of the most well-studied predictors of goals are implicit theories of intelligence. Implicit theories of intelligence refer to the degree to which individuals think their intelligence is fixed (entity theory of intelligence) or malleable (incremental theory of intelligence) (Dweck, 1999). Research has shown that students who believe their intelligence to be fixed (entity theorists) are more likely to endorse performance-oriented goals. On the other hand, students who believe that intelligence is malleable (incremental theorists) are more likely to endorse mastery-oriented goals (Dweck & Master, 2009).

Despite the consensus in the motivational literature about the ability of implicit theories of intelligence to predict mastery and performance goals, there is not much research on how implicit theories are linked to work avoidance goals. Given the maladaptive nature of a work avoidance goal, we speculated that having an entity theory of intelligence might be positively associated with it. It seems plausible that students who think that they cannot do anything to improve their intelligence (i.e., entity theory) will be more likely to want to disengage from the school experience and endorse a work avoidance goal. There is a huge literature linking entity theories of intelligence to maladaptive academic outcomes which makes it likely to be a predictor of work avoidance goal adoption (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Burnette, O'Boyle, Van-Epps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Cury, Da Fonseca, Zahn, & Elliot, 2008; Cury et al., 2009; King, 2012; King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2012).

Aside from implicit theories of intelligence, students' relationships with significant others may also be significant predictors of work avoidance goal adoption. The three significant others that may be considered are parents, teachers, and peers. There is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating the influence of relationships with parents (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009; Steinberg, Darling, & Fletcher, 1995), teachers, (Ganotice & King, 2013; Wentzel, 2012), and peers (Creasey et al., 1997; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Kochel, 2009) on student motivation (see Martin & Dowson, 2009; National Research Council, 2004; Ryan, 2000; for overviews).

Several studies have shown that positive parental influences are associated with adaptive motivation in school. There are three dimensions of parenting behaviour that previous research has shown to be related to optimal school outcomes: parental involvement, autonomy support, and structure (see Grolnick et al., 2009 for an overview). Parental involvement includes the provision of both tangible resources (e.g., time, attention) and relational support (e.g., emotional support, warmth) which provide children with the psychological resources to facilitate optimal motivation in school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Parental involvement has been touted as they key to decreasing the achievement gap between disadvantaged minority children and their more advantaged peers (U.S. Department of Health, 2005). Meta-analytic studies have shown that parental involvement is related to adaptive learning outcomes across a broad range of students (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007).