



# Attachment to the mother and achievement goal orientations at the beginning of middle school: The mediating role of academic competence and anxiety<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study tested the mediating role of perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms in the relationship between attachment security to the mother at the end of elementary school and achievement goal orientations (AGO) in the first year of middle school. The sample included 627 French-speaking youths (46% boys) in the province of Québec, Canada. Results revealed two association patterns between attachment security and AGO. The first indicated a mediating effect whereby perceived academic competence mediated the relationship between attachment security to the mother and mastery goal orientation. The second indicated a sequential effect whereby attachment security predicted fewer anxiety symptoms, which in turn predicted the adoption of performance-approach and -avoidance goals. Results supported the hypothesized relationship between attachment security to mother and AGO, suggesting that goal orientations are partly explained by students' motivational and emotional characteristics. Results are discussed in relation to theoretical perspectives on attachment and achievement goals.

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## 1. Introduction

In motivation research, achievement goal theory (AGT) is a predominant theoretical framework for explaining the underlying motives that drive students to invest and persevere in academic tasks (Anderman & Patrick, 2012). Whereas the effects of achievement goals on learning have been widely investigated since the pioneering work of researchers such as Nicholls (1984) and Dweck (1986), other authors sought to understand how environmental factors contribute to students' goal orientations in learning situations. This research niche includes studies on classroom characteristics, which have generated a critical mass of empirical knowledge to date (see Maher & Zusho, 2009).

In recent years, investigations of contextual determinants of achievement goals have gravitated toward the family environment. Most published studies in this area have focused on parenting styles and

behaviors (e.g., Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010; Gonzalez, Greenwood, & WenHsu, 2001). Meanwhile, adolescents' attachment to parents has also been demonstrated a significant factor in academic motivation (e.g., Duchesne & Larose, 2007). However, no studies to date have examined how attachment security to parents contributes to achievement goal orientation, especially during the transition to middle school. The beginning of middle school is a highly opportune time to investigate goal processes and their contextual determinants, as studies have demonstrated that students' interest in school and learning intention decrease during this period (see Eccles & Roeser, 2011), and that goal intensity fluctuates during the transition from elementary to middle school (e.g., Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2014).

The aim of this study was to prospectively examine how attachment security to the mother, measured at the end of elementary school, predicts students' achievement goal orientations at the end of the first year of middle school, as well as to determine the potential mediating role of perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms in the relationship between attachment security and goal orientations. Although there is evidence for a relationship between parental attachment and achievement goals, the underlying mechanisms remain unclear, along with the contribution of attachment security during the middle school transition.

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### 1.1. Achievement goals: theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence

AGT (Elliot, 2005) proposes that goals play a unique role in the motivational process of learners: they regulate actions in learning situations that involve competence and achievement. With respect to what guides students' behaviors, AGT distinguishes between approaching and avoiding competence (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Thus, achievement motivation is classified into two forms: appetitive (approach) and aversive (avoidance), according to emotional valence, or the positive (e.g., pleasure) or negative (e.g., fear) feelings associated with a stimulus or situation (see Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Pekrun, 2007). Positive emotional valence translates into a desire to succeed and to orient one's actions toward promoting desired outcomes (e.g., being proud of oneself), whereas negative emotional valence leads to avoidance of failure or outcomes that threaten one's feeling of competence (e.g., looking incompetent).

The approach–avoidance distinction is the core concept common to the three contemporary models of AGT (trichotomous,  $2 \times 2$ , and  $3 \times 2$ ). The trichotomous model (Elliot & Church, 1997) proposes three types of goals: 1) mastery goals, which aim at the development and mastery of competences (e.g., acquiring knowledge and skills); 2) performance-approach goals, toward normative ability (e.g., outperforming others); and 3) performance-avoidance goals, aiming to avoid normative incompetence (e.g., to avoid performing worse than others). The  $2 \times 2$  model (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2000) also applies the approach–avoidance distinction within mastery goals, with the addition of mastery-avoidance goals (striving away from incompetence and avoiding loss of acquired skills and competencies). Finally, the  $3 \times 2$  model (Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011) includes six goal types: task-approach (attainment of task-based competence), task-avoidance (avoidance of task-based incompetence), self-approach (attainment of self-based competence), self-avoidance (avoidance of self-based incompetence), other-approach (attainment of other-based competence), and other-avoidance (avoidance of other-based incompetence).

Despite the appeal of the above-mentioned models, the present study is based exclusively on the trichotomous model, which is widely accepted in the AGT literature (Bong, 2009). The relevance of mastery-avoidance goals has been called into question by several researchers (Deshon & Gillespie, 2005; see Maher & Zusho, 2009), and the few studies addressing the  $3 \times 2$  model have used samples of university students (Elliot, Murayama, Kobeisy, & Lichtenfeld, 2014; Elliot et al., 2011), such that the model has not been validated with younger students.

AGT-based research has yielded a substantial body of knowledge on the importance of the three-goal model for various aspects of learning. For instance, a mastery goal orientation has been associated with several positive educational outcomes (e.g., self-regulation, deep processing strategies, self-efficacy, positive emotions), whereas performance-avoidance goals have negatively predicted these outcomes (Bartels, Magun-Jackson, & Kemp, 2009; Davari, Lavasani, & Javad, 2012; Elliot & Pekrun, 2007; Ferla, Valcke, & Schuyten, 2010; Law, Elliot, & Murayama, 2012; Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Michou, & Lens, 2013). However, the findings on the relationship between performance-approach goals and learning outcomes are inconsistent, with positive, negative, or non-existent associations reported across studies (see Anderman & Patrick, 2012; Maher & Zusho, 2009). One proposed explanation for this inconsistency is the lack of differentiation between intentions to outperform others or to project a positive self-image (i.e., demonstrate competence; for a discussion, see Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Nevertheless, this distinction should not be overlooked, as it improves predictions of student outcomes (i.e., positive when the intention is to outperform, but negative when the intention is to demonstrate competence; see Hulleman, Schragar, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Senko et al., 2011). In the present study, achievement goals were measured with the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS; Midgley et al., 2000), which focuses on the competence-

demonstration dimension of performance-approach goals (Midgley et al., 2000; Senko et al., 2011).

### 1.2. Attachment, exploration, and motivation

In addition to the correlates and outcomes associated with achievement goals, studies have sought to understand the role of certain socio-educational factors in the adoption of goal orientations. Although much attention has been paid to the classroom climate, due to its close association with achievement goals (Ames, 1992; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990), other studies have considered the contribution of students' relationships with their parents (e.g., Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010). Nevertheless, the parents' contribution remains relatively understudied in AGT research, more particularly in terms of the attachment bond between young adolescents and parents.

Attachment is generally defined as a cognitive representation of an enduring emotional bond that is developed with an attachment figure (i.e., the primary caregiver) through proximity, availability, and responsiveness when the child needs reassurance or protection (Bowlby, 1973). This bond is crucial for children's development, because it enables them to cope with the stresses of fear and distress, while at the same time encouraging them to explore the physical and social environment with confidence (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Over time, repeated comforting experiences associated with the caregiver contribute to children's psychological security and the development of a secure internal working model (IWM; Bowlby, 1973).

The IWM is a cognitive framework comprising mental representations for understanding the world, self, and others. It guides how children process social information and informs their future attachment behaviors (see Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Children with a secure IWM view themselves as worthy of affection and respect, and view others as trustworthy, available, and responsive in times of stress. This confidence fosters curiosity and autonomous exploration and enables the development of sophisticated cognitive skills (e.g., attention, working memory, planning) and effective problem-solving skills (Becker-Stoll, Fremmer-Bombik, Wartner, Zimmermann, & Grossmann, 2008; Dahmen, Pütz, Herpertz-Dahlmann, & Konrad, 2012; Jacobsen, Edelstein, & Hoffman, 1994). In contrast, an insecure IWM leads to the belief that one is unloved or undesired by others, and that others cannot be counted on in times of distress. These negative cognitive schemas predispose children to behaviors such as anxious exploration, self-protective strategies, and attentional or emotional problems (see Bowlby, 1973; George & Solomon, 1996; Hembree, 1988; Jacobsen et al., 1994; Solomon, George, & De Jong, 1995).

Attachment research has shown that attachment security is associated with motivational and academic variables. For example, in the only study to explicitly relate attachment to achievement goals as conceptualized by AGT, attachment security to the romantic partner in university students was positively associated with mastery goals, whereas attachment insecurity was positively associated with performance-avoidance goals (Elliot & Reis, 2003). In another study that assessed attachment to the mother at age 6, children with a secure attachment scored higher than their peers with insecure attachment on measures of cognitive engagement and mastery goal orientation at age 8 (Moss & St-Laurent, 2001). Similarly, other studies have shown that 7-year-old children who are securely attached performed better on cognitive measures at ages 9, 12, and 15 than their insecure peers (Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997; Jacobsen et al., 1994). More recently, in a study in adolescents entering middle school (age 12), attachment security to parents was positively associated with academic motivation (Duchesne & Larose, 2007). This concurs with the findings of another study in which attachment security in Grades 11 and 12 (age 17) was positively related to intrinsic motivation (Learner & Kruger, 1997).

Although no study to date has examined the contribution of parental attachment to students' achievement goals in middle school, the available data suggest that children's attachment security to their parents

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