The motivation to learn as a self-presentation tool among Swiss high school students: The moderating role of mastery goals' perceived social value on learning ☆

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ABSTRACT

Although it has been assumed that the motivation to learn – or mastery goal endorsement – positively predicts learning achievement, most empirical findings fail to demonstrate this relationship. In the present research, conducted in a Swiss high school, we adopted a social value approach to test the hypothesis that adolescent students' mastery goals do in fact predict learning, but only if these goals are perceived as highly useful for scholarly success (high social utility), and are not endorsed as a means to be appreciated by the teachers (low social desirability), a finding that has previously been observed among college students and on teacher-graded achievement measures only. Results demonstrate that in spite of potential peculiarities of an adolescent population, individual differences in mastery goals' perceived social utility and desirability moderate the mastery goal endorsement-learning achievement relation. Findings are discussed with regard to both theory development and educational practice.

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1. Introduction

Developing and sustaining adolescent students' motivation to learn represents an important educational challenge for teachers, parents, and policy-makers alike, as this motivation is assumed to foster learning and achievement (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Indeed, the motivation to learn has been shown to favor various positive outcomes related to learning, such as task interest, persistence after failure, help seeking, and cooperation (see for reviews Darnon, Dompnier, & Poortvliet, 2012; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010; Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). In achievement goal

research, motivation to learn, to progress, and to master tasks has been referred to as mastery – or learning – goals.[1] These goals have generally been contrasted with performance goals, whose focus is on demonstrating competence as compared to others (Ames, 1992; Elliot, 1999; Nicholls, 1984).

In spite of the positive link between mastery goals (hereafter MG) and various achievement-related outcomes, the link with actual achievement remains a much debated issue (Senko et al., 2011). For instance, a review by Linnenbrink-Garcia, Tyson, and Patall (2008) indicated that only 40% of the relevant studies found evidence for a positive relation between MG and achievement. Findings from recent meta-analyses highlighted the overall small MG-achievement correlations (Huang, 2012; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz,

[1] Mastery goals, as performance goals, have been further separated into mastery-approach (the motivation to learn) and mastery-avoidance goals (the motivation to avoid not to learn; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). In this research we focus on mastery-approach goals, as they are the ones supposed to predict achievement (Elliot & Murayama, 2008); for the sake of simplicity, we will then use the term *mastery goals* for mastery-approach goals.

2010; Wirthwein, Sparfeldt, Pinquart, Wegerer, & Steinmayr, 2013), leading some researchers to argue that it is "time to move on to other constructs that can better guide our understanding of achievement" (Huang, 2012, p.68).

1.1. Explaining the inconsistent mastery goal–achievement relationship

The fact that MGs are often weakly or unrelated to actual achievement highlights an important paradox in achievement goal research: Students who manifest the motivation to learn and to progress are not necessarily those who perform well. Why is this the case? Several explanations have been proposed for answering this intriguing question. A first explanation may lie in variations related to students' age, as a developmental trend seems to emerge in achievement goal research. Indeed, the MG-achievement relationship is more consistently found among elementary and middle school samples than among high school and college samples (see for reviews Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2008; Shim, Ryan, & Anderson, 2008), although age or grade level have not emerged as significant moderators in meta-analytic work (Van Yperen, Blaga, & Postmes, 2014; Wirthwein et al., 2013; see also Huang, 2012). A second explanation may be found in the use of different types of MG scales. As shown in meta-analytic work (Hulleman et al., 2010), the MG – achievement link appears to be stronger when MG are measured without any reference to goal-relevant language (e.g., items referring to interest or affect). A third explanation is that students who pursue MGs have their own learning agenda that differs from the teachers' agenda, which may handicap them in some school contexts (Senko, Belmonte, & Yakhkind, 2012; Senko, Hama, & Belmonte, 2013; Senko & Miles, 2008).

Despite their respective merits, all of these explanations rely on the implicit assumption that students' endorsement of achievement goals does exclusively reflect their true commitment with these goals. But does this assumption fit the social reality of most academic situations? What would be the consequences for interpreting the MG — achievement relation if this was an unwarranted assumption? In the next section we develop an approach that shows how such an assumption is problematic, since in many educational situations students endorse achievement goals, and especially MGs, not only because they truly pursue these goals, but also because they know they can use them as a self-presentation means to express some social value.

1.2. Mastery goal endorsement in its social context: a social value approach

According to recent research (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009) MGs are strongly promoted by teachers, and socially valued on the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment: Social desirability (or warmth) and social utility (or competence; Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Beauvois, 2003; Beauvois & Dubois, 2009; Dubois & Beauvois, 2005; Pansu & Dompnier, 2011). According to Beauvois (2003), these two dimensions refer to two distinct facets of persons' social value. Social desirability denotes the individuals' capacity to satisfy the motivations of the members of a given social group and the degree to which they are liked by these group members. Social utility denotes the individuals' capacity to satisfy the functional constraints of a given social environment, and the degree to which they can succeed in this environment.

Using this social value framework to study achievement goal promotion at university, Darnon et al. (2009, study 1) showed that university students knew the positive consequences of MG endorsement on social judgment and were able to use this knowledge for self-presentation purposes. Evidence for this was garnered with the self-presentation paradigm (Gilibert & Cambon, 2003; Jellison & Green, 1981; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998), with participants asked to respond to items of a MG scale (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) according to different instructions: Standard, social desirability, and social utility. In the "standard" group, participants indicated their own

level of agreement with each item (this condition corresponds to the standard instructions typically used in achievement goal research). In the "social desirability" group, they were asked to respond to the items as if they possessed all the qualities to make themselves likeable and popular with their teachers, that is, to use their knowledge of the construct's social desirability to serve self-presentation purposes. In the "social utility" group, they were asked to respond to the items as if they possessed all the qualities to succeed at university in the eyes of their teachers. Results revealed that students reported higher levels of MGs in the "social desirability" and "social utility" groups than in the "standard" group.[2] These findings show that, on average, students can mobilize their knowledge of MGs' social value to align with what is socially valued in educational contexts (see Darnon et al., 2009, pilot study 1).

But does it mean that students actually use such knowledge when spontaneously answering a MG scale without any explicit self-presentation instructions? One way to answer this question is to have a closer look at the context in which MGs are generally studied. Indeed, most of achievement goal research has been conducted in university or school contexts (Hulleman et al., 2010) and the educational system plays a central role in the distribution of social status in society (Darnon et al., 2012; Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996). Thus, the typical class contexts in which individuals are generally asked to report their personal level of MG endorsement happen to be highly evaluative and could encourage (some) students to spontaneously adopt self-presentation strategies. Indeed, it has been suggested that self-presentation dynamics are operating in socially meaningful and evaluative contexts (e.g., Darnon et al., 2009; Egloff & Schmukle, 2002; Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998). In other literatures, it is explicitly acknowledged that individuals self-present more favorably in public (as compared to private) contexts (see for instance s). In classrooms, teachers are physically and/or symbolically present, and are as such public, socially meaningful contexts.

In line with this reasoning, Dompnier, Darnon, and Butera (2009) argued that the MG — achievement link paradox may be explained by individual differences in these goals' perceived social value in educational contexts. More particularly, they argued that when students claim to pursue MGs, they may report endorsing these goals for at least two, non exclusive reasons: Because they truly pursue these goals – as assumed by classical achievement goal research – or because they want to be positively judged by the social agents in charge of the distribution of rewards in the university system, namely their teachers. Within this perspective, individual differences in students' perceptions of MGs' social desirability and social utility – as measured by the self-presentation instructions – are conceived of as the reasons behind goal endorsement (Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Urdan & Mestas, 2006; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014) that influence their psychological meaning (Dompnier, Darnon, & Butera, 2013). In other words, mastery goal endorsement on a self-report scale under standard instructions would not have the same meaning depending on the reasons why students report endorsing these goals, that is to be appreciated by their teachers (social desirability reasons) and to succeed in educational contexts from their teachers' perspective (social utility reasons). This conceptualization is in line with research on "goal complexes" (Elliot, 2006), which assumes that achievement goals may have different consequences depending on the reasons underlying their endorsement.

Consistent with hypotheses, Dompnier et al. (2009) demonstrated in a longitudinal study conducted on French psychology undergraduates that

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[2] Darnon et al. (2009) further demonstrated that performance-approach goals (i.e., trying to outperform others) were perceived as useful (high social utility), but not desirable (low social desirability). Performance-avoidance goals (i.e., trying not to perform more poorly than others) were instead perceived as desirable, but not useful. These findings indicate that students do not uniformly inflate their reported levels of achievement goals under self-presentation instructions, but that these levels align with the social value of each specific goal in educational contexts.