Learning and Instruction 23 (2013) 60–68

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Learning and Instruction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/learninstruc

Performance-approach goal effects on achievement under low versus high challenge conditions

Corwin Senko [a,*], Amanda M. Durik [b], Lily Patel [b], Chelsea M. Lovejoy [b], David Valentiner [b]

[a] Psychology Department, State University of New York-New Paltz, 600 Hawk Dr., New Paltz, NY 12561, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 December 2011
Received in revised form
24 May 2012
Accepted 28 May 2012

Keywords:
Achievement motivation
Goals
Interest
Challenge

ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the effects of university students' achievement goals on performance under low versus high challenge conditions. The first was a laboratory experiment in which participants were assigned goals to pursue on a novel mathematics task alleged to be simple or complex to use. The second was a survey study in which students set goals for courses rated by others as easy or hard. In direct opposition to the common premise that performance goals are maladaptive on complex or challenging tasks, both studies found that performance-approach goals facilitated high achievement in the high challenge condition but not in the low challenge condition. Additional findings indicate this pattern may be stronger when the task or class is relatively interesting, perhaps because interest inspires autonomous instead of controlling reasons for pursuing performance-approach goals. Implications for goal theory are discussed.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Who persists and succeeds under challenging conditions? This basic question of achievement motivation has long fascinated parents, coaches, supervisors, and educators alike. It also inspired the development of achievement goal theory (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). This theory has generated vast amounts of research, much of it exploring the consequences of pursuing different achievement goals. Surprisingly little of this work, however, has examined how those goals influence actual achievement on challenging (versus simple) tasks. We review this theory and the corresponding research below and then provide two studies that systematically test goal effects on challenging versus simple tasks. Throughout, we focus primarily on "performance-approach goals," which have garnered a great deal of debate about when they might be beneficial versus detrimental to pursue.

Achievement goal theory spotlights two broad goals. Mastery goals focus on skill development and thus define success with self-referenced standards (i.e., improvement or subjective feelings of having learned) or task-based standards (i.e., solving 85% of problems). Performance goals focus on outperforming peers and thus define success with normative standards. Most research also separates performance goals into performance-approach (striving to outperform others) versus performance-avoidant (i.e., striving to avoid being outperformed) types. Mastery goals can be separated into mastery-approach (i.e., striving to learn or improve) or mastery-avoidant (i.e., striving to avoid skill diminishment or learning failures) types as well, but the mastery-avoidant construct is not yet widely accepted within the field. We, too, focus on the original mastery-approach goal and the two performance goals here.

Goal theory posits that mastery-approach (MAP) goals are the most adaptive goal and should match or surpass both performance goals in producing achievement and other benefits (for a historical review, see Elliot, 2005). Nearly three decades of research has examined this broad hypothesis (for reviews, see Baranik, Stanley, Bynum, & Lance, 2010; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Much of this work has been done in field settings, using self-report goal measures, though there are also a number of experiments that manipulate goals. With either method, MAP goals produce numerous benefits. For example, MAP goals are critical in the deepening of interest (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002) and promote various benefits that should translate into high achievement, such as self-efficacy and effort, elaborative learning strategies, and help-seeking (e.g., Diseth, 2011; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Vrugt & Oort, 2008). Curiously, despite these benefits, MAP goals seldom directly aid achievement (see Hulleman et al., 2010). In

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 845 257 3602; fax: +1 845 257 3474.
E-mail address: senkoc@newpaltz.edu (C. Senko).

0959-4752/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2012.05.006

contrast, performance-avoidance (PAV) goals promote mostly negative outcomes, such as low achievement, low self-efficacy, high anxiety, and poor study strategies (see Baranik et al., 2010).

The research summarized above for MAP and PAV goals has been consistent and noncontroversial. That has not been the case for performance-approach (PAP) goals: many studies link PAP goals to mild anxiety and the use of superficial learning strategies (e.g., Huang, 2011; Vrugt & Oort, 2008), yet many also link PAP goals to positive affect, high self-efficacy, effort and persistence, and academic achievement (e.g., Diseth, 2011; Elliot et al., 1999; Huang, 2011). Part of the inconsistency may be due to discrepancies in how researchers define PAP goals. Some measures and manipulations of PAP goals emphasize outperforming others (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001), but others emphasize earning favorable judgments by demonstrating high ability (e.g., Midgley et al., 2000). The first is concerned with how to define and attain competence, the latter with the social consequences of attaining competence. This distinction seems to matter. A recent meta-analysis of approximately 100 studies revealed that PAP goals which focus on outperforming others tend to provide positive links with achievement, whereas those which focus on demonstrating talent tend to provide negative links (Hulleman et al., 2010).[1] As our main research aim is to determine when goals are most likely to aid achievement, we will focus on the normative-based form of the PAP goal in this paper and in the current studies. On the rare occasion that we discuss the competence-demonstration form of the goal, we will, for clarity, apply Urdan and Mestas's (2006) "appearance goal" label.

To summarize, PAV goals generally predict negative outcomes and MAP goals predict positive outcomes except achievement, while PAP goals often predict high achievement and related processes despite also promoting mild anxiety and surface learning strategies. These effects align well with goal theory, with one exception: the surprising finding that PAP goals predict academic achievement more robustly than do MAP goals. Naturally, this PAP goal link with achievement has come under intense scrutiny, with theorists debating its generalizability to challenging tasks (Brophy, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001).

1.1. PAP goal effects on low versus high challenge tasks

One perspective is that PAP goals facilitate achievement on hard tasks at least as much, if not more, than on simple tasks. Theorists taking this view offer arguments that resonate with classic findings in the *need for achievement* literature (Atkinson, 1964; Trope, 1975). People with a high level of dispositional achievement orientation seek and thrive in challenging conditions, because success on challenging tasks, compared to simple tasks, offers greater pride and a more meaningful diagnosis of one's current ability. Thus, the positive impact of achievement orientation on effort and performance is pronounced on challenging tasks but weak on simple ones. Achievement goal theorists later adopted this logic when positing that people who pursue PAP (or MAP) goals seek challenge and perform well in challenging conditions (Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 2005; Nicholls, 1984).[2] Supporting this perspective, research shows that PAP goals are predicted by high achievement orientation (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and are linked to various indicators of challenge-seeking. For example, students who pursue PAP goals perceive an upcoming exam as a challenge (McGregor & Elliot, 2002) and experience feelings of hope and anticipated pride (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). They also display high effort and persistence when working on extremely challenging problems (Sideridis, 2005). Many studies (e.g., Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003; McGregor & Elliot, 2002) also show that PAP goals predict setting lofty, specific goals (e.g., for grades in a course, or race times in a competition) and, importantly, this effect appears to be stronger for difficult tasks than easy tasks (Horvath, Herleman, & McKie, 2006). Similarly, when given a choice in task difficulty, people pursuing PAP goals tend to choose a hard instead of an easy task, even after just experiencing a failure (Jagacinski, Kumar, & Kokkinou, 2008). Finally, research shows that social comparisons – an intrinsic feature of PAP goals – can boost achievement when focused upward toward role models whose success inspires and challenges people (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999).

The other perspective is that PAP goals facilitate achievement on relatively simple tasks but hinder it on hard tasks. Theorists taking this view offer two arguments. One is that, under challenging conditions in which failure is a real possibility, PAP goals trigger worrisome thoughts about having less ability than others, thus diverting attention away from task demands (Brophy, 2005; Hoffman, 1993). The other argument, offered primarily for learning contexts, traces to the common finding that PAP goals often prompt a shallow learning strategy (i.e., rote memorization) instead of a deeper strategy (i.e., elaboration and synthesis of course material). Thus, it is plausible that PAP goals facilitate achievement on simple tasks requiring only superficial topic knowledge, but undermine it on challenging tasks requiring deeper knowledge (Brophy, 2005; Midgley et al., 2001). A review of studies relevant to each argument showed surprisingly little support for either, however (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). For example, in contrast to the first argument that PAP goals distract attention, PAP goals are typically unrelated or positively related to task focus (e.g., Cury, Elliot, Sarrazin, Da Fonseca, & Rufo, 2002; Dickhäuser, Buch, & Dickhäuser, 2011; Lee et al., 2003). Likewise, although PAP goals do often trigger mild anxiety, it does not appear to be of sufficient magnitude to debilitate task performance and is often countered by equally mild positive affect (Huang, 2011). The available research suggests it is actually PAV goals that arouse high anxiety, distract attention, and undermine achievement.[3] Likewise, in contrast to the assumption that PAP goals facilitate achievement only in contexts that reward surface comprehension, the use of surface learning strategies is typically unrelated or negatively related to academic achievement and, therefore, cannot explain why PAP goals aid achievement (Senko et al., 2011).

The above two perspectives agree that PAP goals are beneficial (or at least not detrimental) on simple tasks but disagree about whether they are beneficial on challenging tasks. Each is sensible, yet the available research provides stronger support for the position that PAP goals are sometimes beneficial on challenging tasks. However, that research allows, at best, only an indirect test of this issue. A proper test requires comparing PAP goal effects on achievement on simple versus challenging tasks, either in the field

[1] Hulleman et al.'s meta-analysis showed that PAV goals often predict low achievement whether defined in terms of normative comparison or competence demonstration. Also, MAP goals predict high achievement when embedded with positive affect or challenge-seeking elements, but not when stripped of these confounding elements.

[2] Dweck (1986) and Nicholls (1984) did not use the PAP goal and PAV goal terms; those were introduced later (Elliot & Church, 1997). But they did theorize that performance goals encourage challenge-seeking and related processes among people possessing high confidence (cf. PAP goals), and low challenge-seeking among people lacking it (cf. PAV goals).

[3] Insofar as great challenges or failures create self-doubt, it is possible that students would switch from a PAP goal to a PAV goal, of course (Brophy, 2005; Nicholls, 1984). However, there is also reason to believe that the approach and avoidant systems undergirding each goal minimize this goal switching (Elliot, 2005). At this point, there is scant research on goal switching, let alone evidence (see Senko et al., 2011).

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/365630

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/365630

Daneshyari.com