



## Classroom goal structures, social achievement goals, and adjustment in middle school

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### ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the mediating role of social achievement goals in the relation between classroom goal structures and academic engagement and social adjustment among 373 middle school students (52.8% female). Students' perceptions of classroom goal structures were measured in Fall; social achievement goals and academic and social outcomes were measured in Spring. Structural equation modeling analysis confirmed that social achievement goals partially mediated the effects of perceived classroom goal structures on academic and social outcomes. Perceived classroom mastery goal structure predicted social development goals positively but social demonstration-approach goals negatively. Perceived classroom performance goal structure positively predicted social demonstration-approach and avoid goals. Subsequently, social development goals were related to adaptive outcomes (e.g., academic engagement and social satisfaction) while social demonstration-approach goals predicted negative outcomes (e.g., disruptive behaviors and social worry). Interestingly, social demonstration-avoid goals predicted high social worry but low disruptive behaviors. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Academic achievement goals have received much attention due to their strong predictive utility of students' engagement and achievement in school (Elliot, 2005; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Kean, 2006). However, beyond academic achievement goals, students pursue a wide array of social goals at school and researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of such non-academic goals for students' adjustment at school (Anderman, 1999; Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Ryan & Shim, 2006; Urda & Maehr, 1995).

Students approach social situations with different social achievement goals, which have significant implications for their social adjustment (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). However, little is known about whether these different social achievement goals have implications for academic adjustment in addition to social adjustment at school. In addition, no previous studies have examined classroom antecedents related to social achievement goal

adoption. This gap is surprising considering the developmental characteristics of early adolescence. Increased concerns over peer relationships and status in the peer group during this period (Berndt, 1999; Brown, 1990; Hartup, 1983) suggest that social goals may be exceedingly important for young adolescents' academic and social adjustment at school. Furthermore, given that early adolescence marks the beginning of a downward spiral in motivation, engagement, and achievement for many adolescents (Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Roeser & Eccles, 2000; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), identifying classroom characteristics related to healthy social achievement goals can provide useful information for educators, parents, and policy makers. In sum, the present study aimed to examine classroom characteristics that are linked to students' adoption of different social achievement goals and investigated the implications of social achievement goals for both social adjustment and academic engagement.

#### 1.1. Conceptualization of social achievement goals

While there are various approaches to goals (Elliot & Fryer, 2008), goals are commonly defined as cognitive representations of what individuals want to accomplish and thus, direct and energize behavior (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Pintrich, 2000). In general, social goals refer to what students are focused on and

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trying to accomplish when interacting with their peers (Ryan & Shim, 2006). Among various approaches to the conceptualization of social goals, we take an achievement goal orientation approach. Individuals approach social situations with different purposes, reasons, and orientations toward social competence. Social achievement goals deal with such ultimate reasons for social engagement (Ryan & Shim, 2006).

Three types of social achievement goals, that represent distinct orientations toward social competence, have been proposed to be important to students' adjustment and well-being (Ryan & Shim, 2006). A *social development goal* involves developing social competence with a primary focus on improving social relationships and social skills (e.g., gaining insights into friendship or learning how to get along with others); a *social demonstration-approach goal* involves demonstrating social competence with a focus on garnering positive feedback from others and gaining social prestige (e.g., being seen as "cool" or "popular"); and a *social demonstration-avoid goal* involves hiding the lack of social competence and avoiding negative judgments from others (e.g., not being seen as a "loser"). Previous studies have consistently shown that social achievement goals play an important role in social adjustment and psychological well-being (Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). To date, research has not examined the effects of social achievement goals on academic engagement.

### 1.2. Social achievement goals and academic and social adjustment in middle school

With the focus on developing one's competence, deepening the social relationships, and better understanding one's friends, social development goals are likely to lead students into more satisfying connections with others (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). These students are likely to be considerate of others' needs and try to figure out the best thing for the relationship; consequently, the quality of their social relationship is likely to be enhanced. Similarly, a social development goal has been related to positive perceptions of social relationships, heightened social efficacy, and lower social worry (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). In addition, students with social development goals are less likely to be fettered by concerns about peers' judgment and rejection. Thus, this goal type may help students focus on and enjoy schoolwork by freeing them from undermining thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, students with social development goals are more likely to focus on positive incidents while downplaying the significance of negative ones (Elliot et al., 2006) and such a tendency may help students maintain a positive attitude and enjoy what they learn at school. Thus, based on prior research and our rationale, we expect that social development goals will be positively related to adaptive form of academic engagement (i.e., high emotional engagement but low disruptive behavior) and adaptive social adjustment (i.e., high social satisfaction but low social worry).

Research has proposed that social demonstration-approach goals are undergirded by both dispositional need for achievement and fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 1997; Ryan & Shim, 2006) and thus, this goal type is complex in nature. With its inherent approach tendency (i.e., focusing on attaining positive outcomes), a social demonstration-approach goal seems to bring about positive social outcomes such as high social competence (Ryan & Shim, 2006), popularity and low anxious solitary behaviors (Ryan & Shim, 2008). However, such positive effects may be offset, as the attainment of this goal is contingent on the reaction of others. That is, students with this goal focus reported higher fear of negative evaluation of

others (Horst et al., 2007) and tended to worry about their social behaviors and relationships (Ryan & Shim, 2006).

Putting forth efforts in school is increasingly viewed as "uncool" during early adolescence (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Thus, students with the desire to look cool and popular to peers may devalue academic tasks and show disruptive behavior as a tactic to garner socially favorable attention from their peers. Consistent with this prediction, social goals focusing on acquiring social status and popularity have been linked to negative attitudes toward school (Anderman, 1999), less effort and more disruptive behavior (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008), and maladaptive pattern of academic help seeking behaviors (Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Shin, 2011). Taken together, social demonstration-approach goals seem to have both benefits and consequences. Based on prior research and our rationale, we expect that social demonstration-approach goals will show positive relationships with both adaptive and maladaptive indicators of academic engagement and social adjustment.

The avoidance nature of social demonstration-avoid goals, undergirded by negative views of one's social competence (Ryan & Shim, 2006), is likely to lead students to withdraw from social situations. Withdrawal is the best way to avoid any potential negative outcome. In addition, such focus on negative possibilities and fear of negative judgment (Horst et al., 2007) seem to lead to maladjustment, encompassing negative perceptions of social relationships, overall loneliness, social worry, depression when faced with interpersonal stress, and anxious solitary behavior (Elliot et al., 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). In addition, the concern over others' negative judgment about their lack of social competence (e.g., appearing socially awkward) and potential undesirable outcomes (e.g., being ridiculed, excluded, teased, and considered as 'nerd' or 'geek') is likely to be distracting and hence prevents students from enjoying schoolwork. Like students with social demonstration-approach goals who may disengage from academic endeavors in order to look 'cool', students with demonstration-avoid goals may also devalue academic tasks to avoid looking "uncool" to their peers. Therefore, we predict that social demonstration-avoid goals will be associated with low engagement as well. However, it is not clear whether this goal will be positively related to disruptive behavior given its inherent tendency to avoid failure (e.g., not appearing awkward) rather than actively seek success (e.g., looking cool). Students with social demonstration-approach goals may show disruptive behavior to impress peers with their carefree attitude toward schoolwork and audacity to cross the line and hence, attain their goal of garnering positive social attention. In contrast, students with social demonstration-avoid goals may not view disruptive behaviors as a useful strategy for hiding their lack of social competence. Such behaviors may reveal their weaknesses and thus incur more social costs than benefits. It may be safe to stay invisible in class. Taken together, we expect that a social demonstration-avoid goal will be related to maladaptive social adjustment (i.e., lower social satisfaction and higher social worry). In addition, we expect that this goal type will have a negative relation with emotional engagement but null or a negative relationship with disruptive behavior.

### 1.3. Classroom goal structures and social achievement goal adoption

While examining the implications of social achievement goals for young adolescents' academic and social adjustment, we investigated whether classroom goal structures are related to students' social achievement goal adoption. Classroom goal structures represent "goal-related messages that are made salient in the

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