



## Deconstructing performance goal orientations: The merit of a dimensional approach



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### ABSTRACT

Achievement goal research often differentiates performance approach from performance avoidance goal orientations. On a conceptual level, both performance goal orientations are supposedly founded in a shared normative evaluation standard, and two diverging goal valence dimensions (approach/avoidance). The aim of this article is to put this dimensional model to the test. In a first cross-sectional study ( $n = 321$  pre-service teachers), we extracted all three underlying dimensions from items measuring performance goal orientations and successfully validated them with corresponding dispositional constructs (reference norm, regulatory focus). In a second longitudinal study ( $n = 1290$  secondary school students), we showed that the extracted dimensions are meaningfully associated with antecedents (perceived competence, perceived competitiveness) and consequences (performance anxiety, interest) of performance goal orientations. The result pattern of both studies shows that a dimensional approach can explain the characteristic associations of performance goal orientations to antecedents and outcome variables as well as their interdependence.

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### 1. Introduction

Achievement goal approach is one of the most influential theories in the field of achievement motivation. Researchers within this theoretical framework have investigated human goal striving in achievement domains like sports (Duda, 2005) and schools as places for learning (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006) or working environments (Butler, 2007; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblow, & Schiefele, 2010). The theory distinguishes the striving for qualitatively different goals into performance goal orientation (striving for competence demonstration) and learning goal or mastery goal orientation (striving for competence development), which can both be subsumed as classes of achievement goal orientations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot, 2005). The majority of research

(e.g., Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) further distinguishes performance goal orientations into performance approach goal orientation (striving to demonstrate high competencies) and performance avoidance goal orientation (striving to cover the lack of own competencies). This distinction was originally introduced to explain differential associations of performance goal orientations to pattern of learning: A performance approach goal orientation was meant to facilitate adaptive patterns of learning (indicated by intrinsic task motivation and deep learning strategies), while a performance avoidance goal orientation was meant to be more maladaptive (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Graham & Golan, 1991). Researchers found some empirical proof for the maladaptive nature of a performance avoidance goal orientation (e.g., positive associations with performance anxiety and negative associations with intrinsic motivation, see Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Empirical findings regarding a performance approach goal orientation, however, were more complex: Some studies showed positive associations to achievement or persistence (Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997), while other studies showed associations to rather maladaptive learning strategies (e.g. surface learning, Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). With these findings in mind, critics questioned the necessity of the

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dichotomization of performance goal orientations and argued that other approaches like multi-goal perspectives<sup>1</sup> could better explain the complex associations of performance goal orientations with patterns of learning (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Some researchers even questioned the ability of individuals to differentiate between both performance goal orientations in daily life situations (Urduan & Mestas, 2006). Children in particular did not seem to differentiate between performance approach and performance avoidance goal orientations (Bong, 2009; Bong, Woo, & Shin, 2013) and, even within adults, the observed associations between them were considerably high (often larger than  $r = 0.50$  according to Murayama, Elliot, & Yamagata, 2011). However, most achievement goal researchers still insist on the importance of the dichotomization of performance goal orientations, especially because a performance avoidance goal orientation yields stronger negative results than a performance approach goal orientation (Murayama et al., 2011).

We think that this paradox within achievement goal research (high associations between performance goal orientations, partially different outcome patterns) can be resolved by focusing on the dimensions behind performance goal orientations as especially highlighted by Elliot and McGregor (2001): While both performance goal orientations might be characterized by the same normative evaluation standard (i.e., own competencies are assessed by comparing one's achievement within a reference group; Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002), they are meant to differ in their goal valence by either focusing on accomplishment of positive outcomes (approach goal valence) or prevention of negative outcomes (avoidance goal valence; see Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Normative evaluation standard and goal valences as goal underlying dimensions are suitable to explain the interdependence of both performance goal orientations (based on the shared normative evaluation standard) as well as their differential effects on some outcome variables (based on the respective goal valence). Although the described dimensional model is neither our invention nor new to achievement goal research, empirical evidence on the validity of the dimensional foundation of performance goal orientations is lacking. We intend to provide this crucial empirical evidence by extracting the postulated goal underlying dimensions from items measuring performance goal orientations with latent bifactor models. Furthermore, we want to demonstrate that goal underlying dimensions are indeed suitable to explain the complex association pattern as well as inter- and independence of performance goal orientations.

## 2. Testing the dimensional nature of performance goal orientations

In order to understand why we need to put the foundation of performance goal orientations to the test, we first have to address how assumptions of dimensional models of performance goal orientations have been tested by empirical research in the past. The claim that performance goal orientations are characterized by a normative evaluation standard as well as two diverging goal valence dimensions was explicitly issued by Elliot and McGregor (2001) and has been repeated by achievement goal theorists on regular bases ever since (for contemporary examples, see Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011; Murayama et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014). We would even say that the dimensional nature of achievement goal orientations became one of the core tenets of achievement goal approach in the course of the last two decades of research. Considering the growing popularity of dimensional models (Elliot et al., 2011) and the key relevance of goal underlying dimensions, one could expect that the existence of goal underlying dimensions would be an empirically fortified fact for the time being. At least, we would expect some empirical

evidence for the existence of goal underlying dimensions within performance goal orientations since the introduction of goal valence in the conceptualization of performance goal orientations sparked the discussion about goal underlying dimensions. Therefore, it is rather remarkable that almost no research has actually empirically addressed the mere existence of goal underlying dimensions.

More specifically, research most often tried to validate dimensional models by extracting the appropriate number of achievement goal orientation instances (i.e., compounds of goal underlying dimensions) rather than accounting for the postulated dimensional structure. When considering the dimensional model of performance goal orientations, most research work actually tested whether performance approach goal orientations and performance avoidance goal orientations can be differentiated from each other (Day, Radosevich, & Chasteen, 2003; Midgley et al., 1998; Murayama et al., 2011; VandeWalle, 1997). The empirical evidence on this question has then often been interpreted as evidence for the core assumption that performance goal orientations are heterogeneous constructs founded in a normative evaluation standard but diverging goal valence (Murayama et al., 2011). However, there is no clear logical connection between the mere existence of two clearly separable constructs and the question which dimensions actually constitute the founding fabric of these constructs.

To our knowledge, only one study takes goal underlying dimensions into consideration while validating an achievement goal measure: Elliot and Murayama (2008) modeled goal underlying dimensions as second-order factors to support their assumption that first-order factors extracted from the items of their revised Achievement Goal Questionnaire (AGQ-R) can be understood as compounds of goal valence (approach and avoidance) and evaluation standard (normative and intrapersonal). The results of their analyses showed that second-order factors are extractable in a way that could indeed support a dimensional model of achievement goals. However, the authors did not provide any additional evidence for the construct validity of the second-order factors. Thus, one can solely draw the conclusion that performance goal orientations are actually heterogeneous constructs founded in two underlying dimensions without knowing whether these dimensions actually resemble a normative evaluation standard and diverging goal valence as issued by Elliot and McGregor (2001). The authors of the study in question neither provide a validation via external criteria, nor do they show that previous research can be explained under consideration of these second-order factors. Instead, Elliot and Murayama (2008) once again use the first-order factors to account for the construct validity of their measure.

Moreover, we think that the extraction of goal relevant dimensions as second-order factors (as done by Elliot & Murayama, 2008) might not represent the best way to account for the supposed dimensionality of performance goal orientations. A more direct way would be to use bifactor models (Chen, Hayes, Carver, Laurenceau, & Zhang, 2012), since these models are suitable to answer the question of whether each item that measures performance goal orientations actually reflects two dimensions (normative evaluation standard as well as approach or avoidance goal valence). In the past decade, the use of such bifactor models has brought new insights to individual differences in constructs like intelligence (Valerius & Sparfeldt, 2014), the academic self-concept (Brunner et al., 2010) and well-being (Chen, West, & Sousa, 2006). In Fig. 1, we provide a graphical representation of a bifactor model applied to items measuring performance goal orientations in comparison to more classical factor analytic models reflecting the univariate and dichotomous approach to performance goal orientations.

## 3. Further elaborations on goal underlying dimensions

The application of bifactor models within achievement goal research is not just a switch in methodology. It also offers new possibilities for investigating the relevance of goal underlying dimensions. In other words, we can test whether the dimensional foundation of performance goal orientations is in fact responsible for converging and diverging

<sup>1</sup> The multi-goal perspective postulates that different combinations of achievement goal orientations might lead to differential outcome patterns. Midgley et al. (2001) stated, for instance, that a strong performance goal orientation would only lead to positive patterns of learning when it is accompanied by a strong learning goal orientation.

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