



Personal and contextual antecedents of achievement goals: Their direct and indirect relations to students' learning strategies

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ABSTRACT

In this correlational research, we investigated to what extent achievement goals, in conjunction with need for achievement and fear of failure as well as perceived classroom goal structures, are related to learning strategies among upper elementary school students. After taking into account students' tendency to respond in a socially desirable way, we found, through path analysis, that mastery-approach goals partially mediated the relation of need for achievement and perceived mastery goal structures to learning strategies. These findings are discussed within the hierarchical model framework proposed by Elliot (1999). They suggest that the simultaneous examination of personal and contextual antecedents of achievement goals can enhance our understanding of the processes underlying achievement motivation and its outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Based on the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999), past research has indicated that achievement goals can account for the relation between either personal or contextual antecedents and motivational outcomes (e.g., Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Diseth & Kobbeltvedt, 2010). However, less is known about the mediating role of achievement goals when both sets of antecedents are simultaneously considered in the prediction of motivational outcomes such as learning strategies.

In this research, we used a sample of elementary school students to investigate the patterns of relations among achievement goals, personal (i.e., need for achievement and fear of failure) and contextual (i.e., perceived classroom goal structures) antecedents, and learning strategies. When investigating these interrelationships, we controlled for students' social desirability because as the pursuit of certain goals (such as mastery goals) are more valued, students may report a stronger endorsement of such goals to meet teachers' expectations (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009). As for achievement goals, we conceived them as pure aims and thus defined them distinctly from any fear of failure or any desire to show off competence to others (Elliot, 2005). With respect to learning strategies, we focused on three aspects – critical

thinking, metacognitive self-regulation, and effort regulation – that we consider to represent students' high quality intentional strivings toward learning facilitation (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986).

1.1. Achievement goals and motivational outcomes

Achievement goals are defined as cognitive-motivational purposes for engagement in a particular task where competence is at stake (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Students who use self-referenced or task-referenced standards (i.e., mastery) for defining their competence and orient themselves toward success (i.e., approach) are said to endorse mastery-approach goals. When endorsing mastery-approach goals, students focus on self-improving, understanding, and learning. Students who use other-referenced standards for defining their competence and orient themselves toward success are considered to adopt performance-approach goals. These students focus on outperforming others. In contrast, students using other-referenced standards but orienting themselves away from failure (i.e., avoidance) are assumed to endorse performance-avoidance goals; they focus on avoiding being worse than others² (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Conceiving

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² There is also a possibility that individuals use self-referenced or task-referenced standards and orient themselves away from failure, when for instance they strive to avoid occasions where learning or acquired skills are at stake. In this case individuals are assumed to endorse a mastery-avoidance goal (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). However, because mastery-avoidance goals seem to be more salient in elderly people than in younger population (Elliot, 1999; Ciani & Sheldon, 2010), we decided to disregard mastery-avoidance goals in our research.

achievement goals according to how competence is defined and valued implies that achievement goals are conceptualized as pure aims, and are thus distinct from any reason or motive (e.g., fear of failure, challenge seeking, or need for social approval) underlying their pursuit. This recent approach lends conceptual clarity in the Achievement Goal Theory as the literature review has shown that the “same” achievement goal is in some cases conceptualized and operationalized differently, yet produced contradictory results (Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010).

Past research has indicated that mastery-approach goals are linked with adaptive learning patterns such as increased self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2000) and cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & Tauer, 2008). Performance-avoidance goals have been linked with less adaptive learning strategies (Diseth & Kobbeltvedt, 2010), including self-handicapping, and weak self-regulatory skills (Senko, Durik, & Harackiewicz, 2008). Performance-approach goals have been associated with both positive and negative outcomes. While they have been found to be positively related to intrinsic motivation, they were also positively related to surface processing or not related to deep processing and self-regulated learning (see Elliot & Moller, 2003).

Notably, although achievement goals have been extensively studied within the framework of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997), only few studies (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997, Elliot & Murayama, 2008) have examined how achievement goals, in concert with their potential antecedents, are linked with motivational outcomes. It is, however, critical to examine achievement goals along with multiple antecedents, such as achievement motives and the perceived classroom environment, as the endorsement of achievement goals can be influenced by multiple sources (Elliot, 1999).

1.2. The hierarchical model of achievement motivation

In the hierarchical model of achievement motivation it has been proposed that the endorsement of achievement goals may be influenced, among others, by competence-based constructs (e.g., achievement motives), and perceived environmental factors (e.g., the motivational environment) (Elliot, 1999). Despite the large number of possible antecedents of achievement goals, the most widely studied antecedents have been the achievement motives (Atkinson, 1957): the need for achievement or the motive to succeed and the fear of failure or the motive to avoid failure in achievement tasks.

Past research has indicated that mastery-approach goals are instigated by the need for achievement, performance-avoidance goals by the fear of failure, and performance-approach goals by both the need for achievement and fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). When studying the sequence of relations among achievement motives, achievement goals, and outcomes, it has been shown that the need for achievement is related to metacognitive strategies either directly (Chen, Wu, Kee, Lin, & Shui, 2009; Diseth & Kobbeltvedt, 2010) or indirectly through mastery-approach goals (Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009).

Another set of antecedents of achievement goals that has been investigated within the hierarchical model of achievement motivation concerns contextual factors. It has been proposed that encouraged goal-structures within classrooms may influence students' adoption of different achievement goals (Ames, 1992, Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Specifically, mastery goal structures, which represent learning environments where teachers, through their instructional practices, encourage students' strivings for mastery, understanding and self-improvement, are presumed to facilitate the endorsement of mastery-approach goals. In contrast, performance-approach goal structures, which reflect a classroom climate where competition among students is highlighted, are thought to promote performance-approach goals, whereas performance-avoidance goal structures which refer to learning environments in which teachers emphasize the avoidance of doing worse

than others (Church et al., 2001) are considered to favor the endorsement of performance-avoidance goals.

Apart from investigating the indirect effects of classroom goal structures on outcomes through personal achievement goals, past research has also tested, next to achievement goals, the direct, independent effects of classroom goal structures on motivational outcomes (Murayama & Elliot, 2009). Both lines of research have indicated that students' perceptions of mastery goal structures are associated with endorsing mastery goals, deep-level processing strategies, intrinsic motivation, and higher academic achievement (Lau & Nie, 2008; Miki & Yamauchi, 2005; Murayama & Elliot, 2009). On the other hand, it was shown that perceived performance goal structures have been associated with surface processing (Miki & Yamauchi, 2005), self handicapping strategies (Miki & Yamauchi, 2005; Urdan, 2004), and decreased intrinsic motivation (Murayama & Elliot, 2009). In our study, we therefore tested whether next to the motivational dispositions of need for achievement and fear of failure, perceived classroom structures are related to learning strategies, and to what extent achievement goals mediate this relationship.

1.3. The present study

In the present study we aimed to add to the existing knowledge about achievement goal research in four ways. First, we tested the hierarchical model of achievement motivation by investigating to what extent personal and contextual antecedents of achievement goals, when considered simultaneously, yield an independent contribution to learning strategies and whether these relations are mediated by achievement goals. Second, we examined these patterns of relations by assessing achievement goals as pure aims. Third, given the dearth of studies in younger student populations, we tested the hierarchical model of achievement motivation in a sample of elementary school students rather than college students. Finally, we controlled for students' likely socially desirable responses as previous research has indicated that replying to questions regarding fear of failure (see Conroy, 2001) or personal achievement goals (see Darnon et al., 2009) may elicit socially desirable responses.

Given that we investigated the hierarchical model of achievement motivation and that we assessed achievement goals as pure aims, we hypothesized that achievement goals would partially mediate the relation of achievement motives and classroom goal structures to learning strategies. We anticipated both direct and indirect relations of the four antecedents (i.e., need for achievement, fear of failure, perceived mastery-approach and perceived performance-approach goals structures) to learning strategies. In this broader perspective, we formulated the following hypotheses (Fig. 1).

Hypothesis 1. With respect to the indirect relations, we expected that need for achievement, as an approach dispositional characteristic, would be positively linked to mastery-approach and performance-approach goals (Hypothesis 1a), whereas fear of failure, as an inhibitory tendency (Atkinson, 1957), would be positively linked to performance-avoidance goals (Hypothesis 1b). Despite the inhibitory nature of fear of failure, we also considered the possibility that fear of failure would be positively related to performance-approach goals (Hypothesis 1c) as outperforming others could be conceived by elementary students as a means to avoid failure (Elliot & Church, 1997).

Hypothesis 2. In parallel, we expected a positive relation between perceived mastery goal structures and mastery-approach goals as both of them focus on self-improvement and understanding (Hypothesis 2a). Similarly, we anticipated a positive relation between perceived performance-approach goal structures and performance-approach goals as well as between perceived performance-avoidance goal structures and performance-avoidance goals as both of them focus on competition (Hypothesis 2b).

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