



Is a performance-avoidance achievement goal always maladaptive? Not necessarily for collectivists



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ABSTRACT

Achievement goal researchers assume that performance-avoidance achievement goals are uniformly maladaptive. However, cross-cultural studies suggest that this may not necessarily be the case. The aim of this study was to examine whether collectivism moderated the effects of performance-avoidance goals on key outcomes such as cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies and intrinsic motivation. Filipino secondary school students ($n = 1147$) participated in the study and answered the relevant questionnaires. Results indicated that collectivism moderated the effects of performance-avoidance on the outcome variables of interest. For students high in collectivism, performance-avoidance goals were associated with greater use of cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies and intrinsic motivation. These findings directly contradict the Western literature. Implications for culture and motivation research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Achievement goal theory is one of the most widely-used theoretical models for understanding achievement motivation. It has gained traction in fields such as applied (Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007), clinical (Dykman, 1998), educational (Huang, 2012), and sports (Mascret, Elliot, & Cury, 2015) psychology. Across thousands of studies using different outcomes and operationalizations of achievement goals, mastery-approach goals have been shown to be the most adaptive type of goal and performance-avoidance goals the most maladaptive (Huang, 2012; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Payne et al., 2007). Most researchers have claimed that these findings are universal. Zusho and Clayton (2011, p. 246) noted, "It was generally assumed that the working principles of goal theory applied to all students, irrespective of their cultural background."

However, cross-cultural studies have questioned the universality of these findings. While the beneficial effects of mastery-approach goals appear to be pan-cultural, the effects of performance-avoidance goals seem to be moderated by cultural context. This assumption, however, was never directly tested. When performance-avoidance was correlated with maladaptive outcomes in Western individualist contexts but not in collectivist Asian contexts, researchers concluded that culture was responsible for these differential relationships. However, Western and Asian cultures exhibit differences on a wide range of factors (e.g., SES, ecological factors, government system, educational philosophy) and

not just culture. Differences observed may be due to a number of confounding factors and not culture per se.

In order to establish that culture is responsible for alleged cross-cultural differences, researchers need to use the "unpackaging culture" approach (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). This approach involves measuring the active cultural ingredient responsible for the cultural differences and then examining whether this cultural variable can statistically account for the cross-cultural differences observed.

The aim of this study was to examine whether a particular cultural dimension (i.e., collectivism) moderated the effects of performance-avoidance on various outcome variables such as the use of cognitive learning strategies, meta-cognitive learning strategies, and intrinsic motivation. We focus on the educational domain given that the bulk of achievement goal research has been conducted in educational settings (Hulleman et al., 2010).

1.1. Achievement goals

A basic postulate of achievement goal theory is that motivation and achievement-related behaviors can be understood by the purposes or aims that individuals adopt for engaging in a task (Senko, 2016). Traditionally, researchers distinguished between mastery goals which refer to engaging in a task to develop one's skills relative to oneself and performance goals which refer to engaging in a task in order to demonstrate one's superior performance before others. More recently, psychologists have applied the approach-avoidance distinction to achievement goals. This has resulted in four types of achievement goals: (1) mastery-approach (wanting to achieve relative to self-set standards) (2) performance-approach (wanting to demonstrate

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competence through social comparisons), (3) mastery-avoidance (wanting to avoid the loss of one's competence), and (4) performance avoidance (wanting to avoid the demonstration of normative incompetence) (Senko, 2016).

Mastery-approach goals have been associated with the most adaptive outcomes such as intrinsic motivation, persistence, effort, achievement, and the use of various cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies. Performance-approach goals have been associated with mixed outcomes being positively associated with achievement (a positive outcome) but also anxiety (negative outcome). Relatively fewer studies have focused on mastery-avoidance so evidence for its nomological network is still emerging. With regard to performance-avoidance, numerous studies have shown it to be correlated with maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety and work avoidance. It is also associated with lower levels of achievement and less use of cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies (Senko, 2016).

1.2. Culture and achievement goals

The negative effects of performance-avoidance goals seem to be less pronounced in collectivist (vs. individualist) cultural contexts. A large-scale meta-analysis conducted by Hulleman et al. (2010) which included more than 91,000 participants showed that the correlation between performance-avoidance goals and performance outcomes was positive and significant ($r = .11, p < .05$) for collectivist Asian samples. This correlation was negative ($r = -.14; p < .05$) among individualist Western samples. They also found that mastery-approach and performance-avoidance goals were negatively correlated in Western samples ($r = -.03; p > .05$) but they were positively correlated in Asian samples ($r = .12; p < .01$). Another meta-analytic investigation conducted by Huang (2012) found that the correlation between mastery and performance-avoidance goals was higher for non-Caucasian students compared to Caucasian students. These findings suggest that collectivists made less of a distinction between mastery-approach and performance-avoidance.

Several empirical studies conducted in collectivist Asian contexts found that performance-avoidance goals were positively associated with adaptive outcomes. This particular finding contradicts the Western literature. For example, Kim, Schallert, and Kim (2010) found that Korean students who perceived their classroom climate as mastery-oriented were also more likely to adopt performance-avoidance goals. Performance-avoidance was also found to be positively correlated with more autonomous forms of motivation such as intrinsic and identified motivation. Another study conducted among Korean students by Bong (2005) found that self-efficacy and task value were both positively associated with performance-avoidance. In the Philippines, King (2015) found that performance avoidance was positively associated with academic achievement and engagement. Shih (2008) documented that performance-avoidance was positively associated with identified motivation among Taiwanese students. Chan and Lai (2006) found that performance-avoidance goals were positively associated with deep learning strategies among Hong Kong students. Lau, Liem, and Nie's (2008) study showed that performance-avoidance positively predicted class attentiveness among Singaporean students.

These findings are intriguing. If one looks at the achievement goal literature conducted in Western contexts (which constitutes the bulk of the published literature), it is unlikely that one will find a study wherein performance-avoidance is positively associated with achievement or a study where performance-avoidance and mastery-approach goals are positively correlated. It is a near-unanimous assumption among achievement goal researchers that performance-avoidance is a maladaptive type of goal (Hulleman et al., 2010; Senko, 2016).

What could account for these cross-cultural differences in the correlates of performance-avoidance goals? Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, and Sheldon (2001) argued that these differences are linked to individualism–collectivism. In individualistic cultural contexts, individuals are presumed to

be distinct and separate from significant others, while in collectivist cultural contexts, individuals are construed to be more relational and deeply connected to significant others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individualist cultures encourage people to “stand out” while collectivist cultures encourage individuals to “fit in.” In this way, individualist cultures foster an approach orientation. People in such contexts are focused on achieving desirable positive attributes which would make them stand out, while in collectivist cultures an avoidance orientation is more emphasized. This avoidance orientation makes one focus on eliminating negative attributes. Negative attributes could harm the relational harmony that is valued in collectivist contexts. This makes collectivists more likely to have an avoidance orientation. Due to its normative status in collectivist settings, an avoidance orientation is less likely to lead to negative outcomes.

Empirical support for this notion has been found. For example, Elliot et al. (2001) showed that avoidance goals were associated with lower levels of well-being in individualist (i.e., United States) but not in collectivist (i.e., South Korea and Russia) cultures. Hamamura, Meijer, Heine, Kamaya, and Hori (2009) showed that East Asians (i.e., Japanese) were more attentive to avoidance-related information while Americans were more attentive to approach-oriented information.

However, despite these findings, several issues remain unresolved. First, Elliot et al. (2001) examined a more general type of avoidance goal but not performance-avoidance goals per se. Moreover, Elliot et al. (2001) focused on well-being but not on learning outcomes. Hamamura et al.'s (2009) research focused on a general avoidance orientation and not on the performance-avoidance goal construct per se. Thus, we still cannot conclude that culture is actually responsible for the differential relationships of performance-avoidance goals with learning-related variables. Second, previous studies have not directly measured the cultural dimension of interest. What is usually done in existing studies is that researchers sample students from two different countries and then measure the associations of achievement goals and outcome variables within each culture. Any cross-cultural difference in terms of the pattern of relationships among the variables is then attributed to culture. However, the two countries examined could differ in any number of variables and not just culture. It is impossible for any cross-cultural study to fully equate all the potential confounding variables due to their complexity. Therefore, interpretations of cross-cultural differences need to be made with extreme caution. Without measuring the relevant cultural dimensions purported to account for the cross-cultural differences, one cannot draw strong conclusions.

To solve this conundrum, Matsumoto and Yoo (2006) argued that cross-cultural researchers need to measure the cultural variable of interest and examine whether the purported cultural dimension could account for the hypothesized cross-cultural differences (see also King & McInerney, 2014). We followed this advice in the current study and measured collectivism alongside the other variables of interest (achievement goals and learning outcomes). We examined whether there is an interaction between performance-avoidance and collectivism in terms of predicting key learning outcomes.

To reduce confounds in cross-cultural research wherein samples are taken from different contexts, we conducted our study among a homogeneous group of students from the Philippines. Doing cultural research even when all the samples are taken from one context is acceptable because culture can also be operationalized as part of a person's mindset (i.e., meaning-making framework) and thus can be measured as an individual difference variable (Oyserman, 2011).

1.3. The present study

The aim of the present study was to examine the role of collectivism in the relationship between performance-avoidance goals and key indices of learning. In particular, we investigated whether collectivism moderated the effects of performance-avoidance goals on cognitive strategy use, meta-cognitive strategy use, and intrinsic motivation.

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