

Understanding the impact of intrinsic versus extrinsic goal framing on exercise performance: The conflicting role of task and ego involvement

Maarten Vansteenkiste*, Lennia Matos, Willy Lens, Bart Soenens

University of Leuven, Tiensestraat 102, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

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Abstract

Objectives: Based on self-determination theory [SDT; Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2000). The “what” and the “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 227–268], the present study examines whether the negative effect of framing an exercise activity in terms of an extrinsic, relative to an intrinsic, goal attainment on performance occurs because extrinsic, relative to intrinsic, goal framing detracts individuals’ attention from the exercise activity, thereby undermining a task involvement, while simultaneously activating the tendency to prove one’s ability by outperforming others, thus promoting ego involvement.

Design: Two experimental studies among 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students during their physical education classes were conducted.

Methods: T-testing, one-way ANOVA analyses and regression analyses were performed to examine main effects and mediational effects, respectively.

Results: Results confirmed the hypotheses and further showed that being ego involved when being taught a new exercise activity is antithetical to the development of a task involvement, indicating that goal involvement (in contrast to goal orientations) is a bipolar construct.

Discussion: Findings are discussed in terms of the processes that link goal framing to exercise performance and in terms of the ongoing controversy among achievement goal theorists whether being ego involved in the activity or adopting an ego-approach orientation is facilitative or maladaptive for optimal performance.

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: marten.vansteenkiste@psy.kuleuven.be (M. Vansteenkiste).

Regarding the latter issue, a new multiple goal perspective, that is the regulatory goal perspective, is introduced.

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Introduction

When exercisers, adolescents, and obese individuals do not derive inherent satisfaction and enjoyment from exercising, fitness instructors, physical education (PE) teachers, and dieticians can use very different rationales to convince these individuals to maintain or increase their exercise behaviors. Some suggest that exercising contributes to physical fitness and health, so that individuals ultimately feel more physically active and energetic. Following the mass media's claim that physical attractiveness and beauty are valuable life goals (Shaw & Waller, 1995; Stice & Shaw, 1994), other motivating agents suggest that exercising helps to improve one's figure, to hide the signs of age, or to avoid becoming fat. In short, the goals that socializing agents refer to as a mean to increase exercise adherence and performance can differ considerably in content.

Within Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the goal of physical fitness and health has been labelled intrinsic, whereas the goal of physical beauty and attractiveness has been labelled extrinsic (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Previous research has found that framing an exercise activity in terms of the attainment of an extrinsic goal impairs performance compared to framing the exercise activity in terms of the attainment of an intrinsic goal (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Soenens, & Lens, 2004; see also Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2003). The present study sought to explore the mediating mechanisms that underlie these effects.

To do so, we relied on the distinction made within the Achievement Goal Approach (AGA; Elliot, 2005) between a task (mastery) orientation/involvement, which reflects a focus on mastering the activity at hand, and an ego (performance) orientation/involvement, which represents a focus on achieving higher grades or avoiding to achieve low grades compared to others on achievement tasks (Ames, 1992; Duda, 1989, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984, 1989). In the mid-1990s (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), the overall concept of ego goals was broken down in ego-approach goals (i.e., a focus on outperforming others) and ego-avoidance goals (i.e., focus on avoiding to perform more poorly than others), and later on (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), a full 2 × 2 goal framework was developed by differentiating task-approach goals (i.e., a focus on mastering the activity at hand) from task-avoidance goals (i.e., a focus on avoiding to execute the activity more poorly than one possibly could). The present contribution focuses, however, on the mediational role of approach forms of task and ego goals in the relationship between intrinsic versus extrinsic goal framing and performance. As a further note of clarification, in accordance with Nicholls (1984) and Elliot (2005), in the remainder of the manuscript, we reserve the term orientation to refer to individuals' dispositional preference to approach achievement tasks in a task- or ego-oriented manner, whereas we use the terms task and ego involvement when referring to situation-specific states that are (experimentally) induced by

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