



## FlashReports

## Low ranks make the difference: How achievement goals and ranking information affect cooperation intentions

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## ABSTRACT

This investigation tested the joint effect of achievement goals and ranking information on information exchange intentions with a commensurate exchange partner. Results showed that individuals with performance goals were less inclined to cooperate with an exchange partner when they had low or high ranks, relative to when they had intermediate ranks. In contrast, mastery goal individuals showed weaker cooperation intentions when their ranks were higher. Moreover, participants' reciprocity orientation was found to mediate this interaction effect of achievement goals and ranking information. These findings suggest that mastery goals are more beneficial for exchange relationships than performance goals in terms of stronger reciprocity orientation and cooperation intentions, but only among low-ranked individuals.

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## Introduction

When individuals perform complex tasks, cooperation with others can be paramount. However, during their task-related goal pursuits, some people may opt to engage in cooperation, whereas others prefer to work individually. For example, when individuals have the goal to improve themselves and know that they and a potential exchange partner are performing poorly on an academic task, they may seek cooperation in order to enhance their performances. In contrast, when poor performing individuals would rather outperform each other, they may want to work alone because of their engagement in interpersonal competition. By scrutinizing the joint effects of achievement goals and ranking information on cooperative information exchange, the current investigation aims to connect the achievement goal approach with social comparison research.

### Achievement goals and task-related cooperation

Achievement goals reflect the aim of individuals' achievement pursuits. *Performance goal* individuals compare their performances with others, whereas *mastery goal* individuals compare their present performance with their previous performance (Van Yperen, 2003). Performance and mastery goals have typically been portrayed as approach forms of regulation, that is, directed towards desirable events (Elliot, 2005). Because we focus on approach goals in the present research, henceforth, performance-approach goals

will be referred to as *performance goals* and mastery-approach goals as *mastery goals*. Because exchange partners are both social comparison targets and potential sources of information (Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007), people with performance and mastery goals may have distinctive perspectives on information exchange (Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007).

Specifically, mastery goal individuals have no *outcome interdependence* with exchange partners because they reach their goal when they improve their performance regardless of others' performances. However, they may perceive *positive means interdependence* with the other party (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1989) as information exchange can serve as important means to attain self-improvement. These perceptions of positive means interdependence associated with mastery goals can be expected to enhance an individual's willingness to cooperate by exchanging information. Thus, experiencing positive means interdependence may direct individuals to take on a reciprocity orientation, defined as the confidence that giving useful information will result in receiving good information back (cf. Gouldner, 1960).

In contrast, performance goal individuals have *negative outcome interdependence* because they reach their goal when they outperform others. Such interdependence leads to a reduced willingness to coordinate effort with and be dependent on others, and a reduced readiness to be influenced (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Performance goal individuals will therefore likely perceive *negative means interdependence* as well, which should inhibit a reciprocity orientation and cooperation intentions. However, we propose that this will be contingent upon the individuals' and their exchange partners' performance levels, or ranking information.

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### The moderating role of ranking information

Ranking information provides meaningful points of reference to compare one's task-related performance with others (Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006). Rankings are pervasive in various achievement domains as in academic settings (e.g., students' GPA's), business (e.g., benchmarking), or sports (e.g., ATP ranking). Because performance goal individuals strive to outperform others and mastery goal individuals seek self-improvement, they may react differently to ranking feedback (Butler, 1995).

Furthermore, in the proximity of a meaningful standard (the top or bottom of a ranking), feelings of competition increase and the willingness to cooperate with commensurate others diminishes (Garcia & Tor, 2007; Garcia et al., 2006). So, people were less willing to cooperate when they and others had low or high ranks (e.g., #96 vs. #97, or #4 vs. #5, respectively on a top-100), compared to intermediate ranks (e.g., #51 vs. #52). Having low or high ranks implies that one is very close to being the best or worst, and makes competition salient (Festinger, 1954; Garcia et al., 2006; Mulder, 1977). Given that performance goal individuals see potential exchange partners as adversaries and because competition increases at the endpoints of rankings, we expected that performance goals would decrease the willingness to cooperate with others when ranks are low or high compared to intermediate.

In contrast, mastery goal individuals do not see potential exchange partners as rivals because they are primarily focused on self-improvement. Exchanging and pooling task-related knowledge with others may facilitate rather than hinder their goal attainment (Poortvliet et al., 2007). Self-evidently, the wish to cooperate with others by exchanging information may be particularly strong among low-ranked mastery goal individuals (Ames, 1983; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). As room for improvement is much smaller when ranks are high, individuals' commitment to mastery goals may decrease (Nicholls, 1984), and accordingly, their focus may be redirected to competitive aspects of high ranks (Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). This may cause mastery goal individuals to be less inclined to take on a reciprocity orientation and cooperate when their ranks are increasing.

Taken together, we propose that ranking information has distinct effects on individuals with differing achievement goals. Specifically, in line with Garcia and colleagues (2006), we anticipated a curvilinear relationship between ranking information and cooperation intentions for performance goal individuals. In contrast, for mastery goal individuals, we predicted a negative linear relationship between ranks and willingness to cooperate (see Fig. 1). Consequently, only under low-ranking conditions, we expected a difference between performance and mastery goal individuals. Furthermore, we expected that this interaction effect of achievement goals and ranking information on cooperation intentions would be mediated by individuals' reciprocity orientation.

## Method

### Participants and design

Hundred and forty-one students (79 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.26$  years) participated for payment or course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of the 2 (achievement goal: performance vs. mastery)  $\times$  3 (ranking information: low vs. intermediate vs. high) design.

### Procedure

The participants were asked to order twelve items of the winter survival exercise (Johnson & Johnson, 2000) and to enter their or-

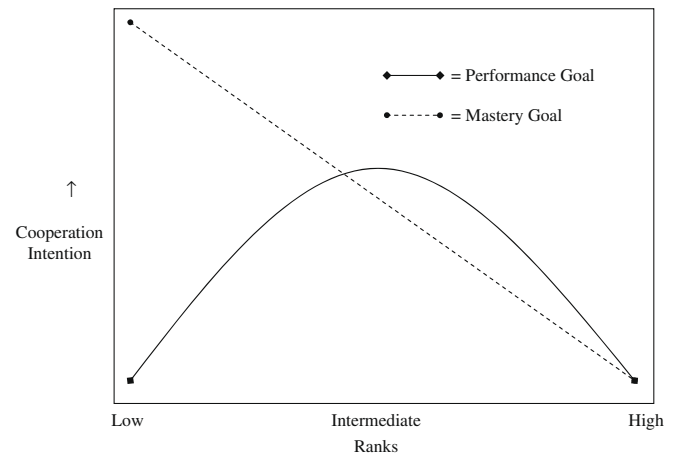


Fig. 1. Expected joint effect of achievement goals and ranking information on cooperation intention.

der into the computer. Participants were told that an ideal order existed, to which theirs would be compared. It was further told that a top-100 had been construed based on earlier orders and participants were informed that they occupied 96th, 51st, or 4th position (low, intermediate, or high own rank).

Then it was told that another participant also carried out this assignment, that there would be an opportunity to exchange task-related information, and that the other occupied 97th, 52nd, or 5th position on the top-100. So, in order to achieve commensurability, the participant and the other occupied two contiguous positions (Garcia et al., 2006). The participants were told that they were expected to make a final individual order after the information exchange opportunity. Then the achievement goal manipulation was induced by recommending the following goals: "perform better than the other on your second order" (performance goal), or "perform better on your second order than on your first order" (mastery goal; Van Yperen, 2003). Finally, participants answered questions about their attitudes and intentions to cooperate with the other, and manipulation checks were assessed.

### Measures

#### Manipulation checks

Participants were asked to indicate which specific goal had been recommended to them. Participants could choose between performance and mastery goal. Ranking information manipulation was checked by asking participants which position they (own position; #1 to #100) and the other had (other's position; #1 to #100).

*Cooperation intention* was measured by asking the participants the extent (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) to which they preferred to work together instead of individually on the task, and whether or not they actually opted for working alone rather than jointly on the task (reverse scored;  $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Reciprocity orientation* was assessed with six items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .65$ ). Illustrative examples are: "I'm glad to help the other, because then I will surely receive a good deal of useful information in return", and "It would be naïve to expect the other to help you, simply because you help this person" (reverse scored).

*Interest in other's information* was assessed to check whether participants with differing ranks differed to the degree to which they feel dependent on help from their peers (six items; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .75$ ). An illustrative example is: "I hope that I can profit from the other's information".

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