



Endorsement of achievement goals across secondary school years: Applying a state-trait framework



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ABSTRACT

This study examined stability and change in endorsement of achievement goals across secondary school years. A longitudinal, complementary, integrative approach was utilized with a sample of 6908 Korean eighth graders followed over three years at one-year intervals. The autoregressive models demonstrated differential stability, whereas latent growth curve models showed mean-level changes. Applying a state-trait framework, achievement goals evidenced both trait and state components; endorsement of achievement goals is stable, but may also exhibit change over time. Although all achievement goal types were more state-like than trait-like, avoidance goals (mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals) were more malleable than approach goals (mastery-approach and performance-approach goals); no differences were found between approach or avoidance goals.

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1. Introduction

Achievement goals have generally been conceptualized from two different perspectives; the first considers goals in terms of individual enduring dispositions, whereas the second emphasizes their situation- and task-specific nature (Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2011). Relative stability is expected over time when achievement goals are considered an enduring disposition (e.g., Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Seifert, 1996). However, examination of the situation- and task-specific nature of goals is based on the assumption that situational and environmental cues may influence the extent to which certain preferences become activated (Shim, Ryan, & Anderson, 2008). In this case, achievement goals are expected to change across time and situation. The extant literature is based on one of these two apparently incompatible conceptualizations; the stability of the achievement goal construct remains a topic of debate. The present study addressed this issue by answering two questions. Do achievement goals really change over time? To what extent are trait and state components incorporated into the measure of achievement goals?

Researchers often fail to clarify their meaning when they describe achievement goals as stable or changeable. Part of the difficulty arises from multiple indices for tracking stability and change, such as mean-level change, rank-order change, ipsative

change, barometric instability, and baseline instability (Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Rosenberg, 1986). A complete understanding of achievement goal stability and change may result from thorough examination of multiple indices, as they are often independent of one another and therefore lead to different conclusions. The present study contributed to this intriguing question by providing complementary perspectives on stability and change in achievement goals with multiple indices.

1.1. Stability of achievement goals: Are goals stable or changing?

Achievement goal theory centers on the personal achievement goals for which individuals strive. These goals generally reflect individuals' reasons for attempting to achieve them; they are associated with different patterns of behavior, attributions, and affective reactions to performance (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 1999). Two primary goals are emphasized; the mastery goal refers to the purpose of developing competence or task mastery, whereas the performance goal refers to the purpose of demonstrating competence relative to others (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986). Later research expanded this dichotomous scheme by differentiating each goal into approach and avoidance valences (Elliot, 1999) leading to four separate types of goals: mastery-approach goals (i.e., striving to learn or improve skills); mastery-avoidance goals (i.e., striving to avoid learning failures or skill decline); performance-approach goals (i.e., striving to outperform others or appear talented); and performance-avoidance goals

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(i.e., striving to avoid doing worse than others or appearing less talented).

Achievement goals have been treated as stable, trait-like, individual difference characteristics (Nicholls, 1989); situation-specific states yoked to situational tasks or contexts (Ames, 1992; Stevens & Gist, 1997); or experimentally induced states (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). Accordingly, there is reliable evidence that individual levels of achievement goals are relatively stable as well as changing across time and situation (Corker, Donnellan, & Bowles, 2013; Fryer & Elliot, 2007).

Several studies suggest that students become less oriented toward mastery goals within the school year (Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Shim et al., 2008), between school years (Braten & Olaussen, 2005; Corker et al., 2013), and across educational transitions (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997). However, other studies show that students' mastery goals remain largely stable within the school year (Bong, 2005; Seifert, 1996; Smith, Sinclair, & Chapman, 2002). Further, studies that focus on specific goals and use corresponding measures (i.e., focus on task- or class-specific goals) also demonstrate stability over time (e.g., Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005).

For performance goals, findings are more divergent and suggest that goals may decrease both within (Meece & Miller, 1999; Seifert, 1996) and between (Meece & Miller, 1999) school years. Performance goals can also increase (Anderman & Anderman, 1999) or remain stable (Anderman & Midgley, 1997) across educational transitions. Further, when performance goals were differentiated into separate approach and avoidance components, performance-approach goals remained stable (Bong, 2005; Fryer & Elliot, 2007) or decreased (Shim et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2002) and performance-avoidance goals either increased (Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Smith et al., 2002) or decreased (Shim et al., 2008) within a school year.

Together, the results concerning goal stability are diverse and mixed; that is, achievement goals seem to be stable but also appear to change over time. However, relatively few empirical studies (e.g., Corker et al., 2013; Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Muis & Edwards, 2009) have investigated the longitudinal stability of achievement goals; when stability has been assessed, it was not usually the study focus (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011). Furthermore, whether and which types of achievement goals are more changing than other types of goals remains unclear.

An important consideration in research on intra-individual stability and change in a construct involves measurement specificity (Stupnisky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012). The hierarchical model of motivation (Vallerand, 1997; Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002) posits that global measurements are the most generalized and assess relatively enduring dispositions, such as achievement goals in the academic domain in general. At the second level, contextual (domain-specific) measurements assess constructs within a particular sphere of activity, such as achievement goals for a specific class over time. At the third level, situational (state) measurements assess present psychosocial constructs, as experienced by the individual at a particular moment. Constructs measured at the global level have the least temporal variability, whereas constructs measured at the contextual level, and more so at the situational level, are more variable. Shim et al.'s (2008) review showed that about half of the research measured achievement goals at the general level and about half measured goals specific to a certain subject or class. Recognizing that researchers typically consider achievement goals via one of these two levels, the present research explored achievement goals at the dispositional level of specificity so as to optimally investigate long-term stability and changes that occur gradually over an extended period of time (as long as 3 years).

1.2. Distinguishing types of change and stability in achievement goals

A plausible reason for these mixed findings is, at least in part, the lack of research attention to the different meanings of several distinctive types of stability and change related to achievement goals. It is important to clearly specify these types, because these indicators yield somewhat different and yet complementary findings (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001). Consequently, the combined use of multiple indices should provide a more complete understanding of stability and change in achievement goals. Nonetheless, there is limited research employing multiple stability indices within a single study (e.g., Corker et al., 2013; Fryer & Elliot, 2007).

The two most common ways to analyze stability are rank-order consistencies and mean-level differences. Rank-order consistency, also referred to as *differential stability*, reflects how much individuals maintain their relative standing on achievement goal measures over time. It is frequently evaluated by considering test-retest coefficients or autoregressive coefficients in structural equation models. Studies that explicitly examined differential stability (e.g., Bong, 2005; Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Muis & Edwards, 2009; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011) revealed moderate to high stability in achievement goals over time. High differential stability was found for all four achievement goals (Fryer & Elliot, 2007). Muis and Edwards (2009) also showed that there were moderate to high levels of stability, with performance-approach goals having the highest level of stability and mastery-approach goals having the least stability over tasks within a semester. Considering stability over a four-year interval, Corker et al. (2013) reported that performance- and mastery-approach goals were most stable, whereas performance- and mastery-avoidance goals were least stable.

Another important index of stability concerns *mean-level change*, which represents the degree to which the average amount of a construct changes over time within a sample and provides insights into normative developmental patterns (Fryer & Elliot, 2007). Mean-level change is conceptually and statistically distinct from differential stability. For example, even when absolute levels of achievement goals increase or decrease over time, rank-order stability would be maintained if each group member's shift occurs in the same direction. Consequently, it is common for there to be a high degree of differential stability *and* considerable mean-level change within the same sample (Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004). Muis and Edwards (2009) found that performance goals (both approach and avoidance) had the highest level of mean-level stability, whereas mastery-approach goals exhibited the greatest variation over time. Conversely, Fryer and Elliot (2007) provided evidence of mean-level stability for performance-approach and mastery-avoidance goals but significant changes over time for mastery-approach and performance-avoidance goals. Tuominen-Soini et al. (2011) revealed statistically significant yet small mean changes in achievement goals over time; mastery-intrinsic and performance-avoidance goals decreased slightly, whereas performance-approach goals increased slightly. As such, achievement goals are not stable over time and the extent of the change may differ across different types of achievement goals.

1.3. States and traits of achievement goals: Latent trait-state-occasion model

There is considerable evidence suggesting that endorsement of achievement goals is stable but may also exhibit change over time. Fryer and Elliot (2007) suggested this question be viewed not in terms of either stability or change but in terms of both stability *and* change. Accordingly, the current study applied a state-trait

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