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Abstract

The current article presents an overview of recent research into social outcomes that accompany the pursuit of achievement goals. On the basis of investigations in various subdisciplines of psychology, we conclude that mastery goals—striving to improve one's own performance—lead to investments in exchange relationships, endorsement of reciprocity norms, and active efforts to integrate different opinions. In contrast, performance goals—striving to outperform others—may result in rather maladaptive social behaviors. We point to three promising avenues for future research: Social consequences of achievement goals could be studied from a multiple-goal perspective, different levels of analysis should be taken into account, and the role of status differences should be examined.

Keywords

achievement goals, mastery goals, performance goals, interpersonal behavior

Achievement is paramount for successful living. Indeed, the motivation to perform well may strongly energize people to engage in a variety of behaviors that are relevant for their performance. It is therefore not surprising that achievement goals have received abundant attention in different fields of psychology. A particularly striking characteristic of achievement situations is that people are often in the presence of others, such as fellow students, coworkers, or teammates. The individual goals that people hold therefore also have strong *social* effects, because people may work with or against others to attain their goals. For example, when students have the desire to be the best in their class, their behavior toward classmates will be shaped in a rather competitive way. On the other hand, when employees adopt goals that deal with self-improvement, they may actually choose to team up with coworkers and act in a much more benevolent way. The strategy that we choose to reach our goals determines how we behave toward people. Our central tenet is therefore that constructive or destructive interpersonal behaviors may importantly be explained by individuals' achievement goals. In the following section, we will start by introducing the concept of achievement goals, after which we will build a conceptual argument for why different achievement goals lead to different patterns of social behavior. We then will review recent research that has focused on the social consequences of achievement goals and discuss implications for future research.

The Social Life of Achievement Goals

Achievement goals reflect the aim of an individual's achievement pursuits and may be defined as frameworks that help to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and react to achievement situations. In the achievement-goal literature, two goals have by far received the most attention: *mastery goals* and *performance goals*.¹ Mastery goals involve the aim of improving one's own performance, whereas performance goals reflect the pursuit of outperforming others (Dweck, 1986). People who strive for mastery goals predominantly compare their present performance with their previous performance and thus develop a self-referenced focus in achievement situations. In contrast, people who pursue performance goals tend to compare their performances with those of others to monitor progress toward their desired goal, thereby developing an other-referenced focus. Given the disparity of focus of people with different achievement goals, such different goal pursuits will presumably result in distinct perceptual-cognitive frameworks with which individuals approach and construct exchanges with others (Dweck, 1986). Because exchange

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partners are social-comparison targets as well as potential sources of valuable information (Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007), people with performance and mastery goals adopt different perspectives on exchanges with others (Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007).

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) considers dependence as the central facet of relationships. In this framework, dependence is based upon a person's need to maintain a relationship with the other in order to achieve his or her own goals. More specifically, at first sight individuals with mastery goals may perceive low interdependence with others, because they reach their goals when they improve their individual performance, regardless of others' performance. However, social exchanges can serve as an important means by which mastery-driven individuals can reach their individual goals of self-improvement. Therefore, those with mastery goals may strongly perceive positive interdependence with others (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). These perceptions of positive interdependence associated with mastery goals can be expected to enhance an individual's willingness to invest in relationship building with potential exchange partners in order to promote self-improvement.

In contrast, individuals with performance goals may experience negative interdependence with exchange partners, because they reach their goals when they outperform others. Such negative interdependence will likely lead to a reduced willingness to coordinate efforts with potential exchange partners, a reluctance to be dependent on the actions of others, and a reduced readiness to be influenced by exchange.

Recent Research on Achievement Goals in the Social Domain

Not surprisingly, since the early days of achievement-goal research, scholars have pitted mastery and performance goals against each other to see which yield most beneficial effects and should therefore be promoted in achievement situations (e.g., Elliot, 2005; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007). This question continues to be the object of debate. However, an important outcome criterion of achievement goals that has so far received scant research attention is interpersonal behavior. So, in order to obtain a complete understanding of the effects of achievement goals and give relevant advice to managers, teachers, or coaches, the interpersonal effects of achievement goals should be taken into account. It is therefore fortunate that in various subdisciplines of psychology, scholars have recently become increasingly interested in the interpersonal effects of mastery and performance goals. Together, these investigations show that different achievement goals lead to different perceptions of a situation and of others in an achievement environment—perceptions that, in turn, lead to differences in social outcomes. For one thing, recent evidence shows that achievement goals predict differences in regulation of task-related conflicts: Mastery goals are associated with a perception of other people as helpers, whereas performance goals are linked to a perception of other people as threats

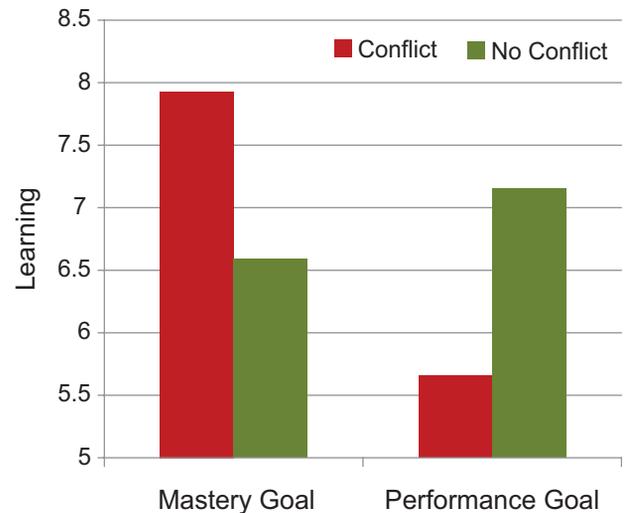


Fig. 1. Learning as a function of type of achievement goal (mastery or performance) and presence or absence of conflict.

(Darnon, Muller, Schragar, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2006). Accordingly, mastery goals predict epistemic conflict regulation, a constructive form of regulation (e.g., trying to understand different viewpoints), whereas performance goals predict relational conflict regulation, a more competitive form of regulation (e.g., trying to demonstrate one is right and the other person is wrong). In one study, students had to work on an academic text and answered questions about this text. They were then confronted with a partner who either agreed (no conflict) or disagreed (conflict) with their answer. Results showed that in a context of enhancing mastery goals, conflict was beneficial for learning, whereas in a context of enhancing performance goals, conflict was deleterious for learning (cf. Fig. 1; Darnon, Butera, et al., 2007; Darnon, Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade, 2007). Goals have also been found to affect social-comparison intentions (Darnon, Dompnier, Gilliéron, & Butera, 2010; Régner, Escribe, & Dupeyrat, 2007): Performance goals always predict intention to compare with others whereas mastery goals do so only when they are accompanied by a strong performance-goal focus (i.e., in a “multiple goals” situation).

Another recent line of research has also demonstrated that goals affect social judgment. The extent to which one endorses different goals strongly modifies the way one is perceived by others (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009). Because performance goals match the social structure of the university (to succeed, it is socially useful to demonstrate superior performance relative to others), strong endorsement of performance goals leads to a positive judgment in terms of social *utility* (competence). However, because performance goals are often seen as “bad goals” by teachers, their strong endorsement leads to a negative judgment in terms of social *desirability* (warmth). Moreover, as far as mastery goals are concerned, the knowledge of the very high social value associated to these goals can further explain various findings obtained so far in the literature (Dompnier, Darnon, & Butera,

2009). Indeed, these goals predict academic performance when one truly believes in their utility, but they do not do so when one only endorses them for self-presentation purposes.

Scholars have also found that individual goals have consequences for the quality of work relationships (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004). Mastery goals were found to be positively related to the quality of the exchange relationships between supervisors and employees. The quality of leader-member exchange in turn explained why mastery-driven individuals had higher levels of job satisfaction, job performance, and innovative behavior. In contrast, performance goals were negatively related to levels of leader-member exchange. Naturally, it is crucially important to understand why different achievement goals lead to these distinct patterns of social interaction. In their motivated-action theory, DeShon and Gillespie (2005) postulate that specific achievement goals activate so-called action-plan goals, which are defined as the practical strategies or pathways that help individuals reach their achievement goals. Specifically, Janssen and Van Yperen (2004) found that individuals with mastery goals establish higher-quality work relationships with their supervisors, relative to individuals with performance goals. This finding is very important, because it shows that such *interpersonal* processes may effectively act as instrumental behaviors that underlie the effects of achievement goals on task-related outcomes at the *individual* level, such as performing well and feeling satisfied with one's job.

Building on these findings, Poortvliet et al. (2007) showed that mastery goals lead to more honest information sharing and being less suspicious toward information-exchange partners, compared to performance goals. In this research, two distinct exchange orientations that explain these outcomes were identified. First, relative to individuals with performance goals, those with mastery goals reported a stronger reciprocity orientation, the perception that exchanging worthy information will result in receiving useful information back from exchange partners. On the other hand, performance goals led to a stronger exploitation orientation, the willingness to profit from task-related efforts of exchange partners paired with a reluctance to offer good information in return. A related finding showed that, unlike performance goals, mastery goals are associated with more backing-up behavior, the provision of resources and effort to help team members who are apparently failing to perform well (Porter, 2005).

Finally, a recent investigation showed that especially when individuals have low perceived competence, mastery goals lead to stronger intentions to engage in task-related collaboration with peers (cf. Fig. 2, Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2009). This is a particularly notable finding, because it indicates that individuals with mastery goals are willing to pursue constructive exchange strategies with others but that these strategies arise from an instrumental motive. Consequently, when individuals with mastery goals perceive themselves to have higher competence, this leads to complacency and a reduced willingness to engage in task-related collaboration with potential exchange partners.

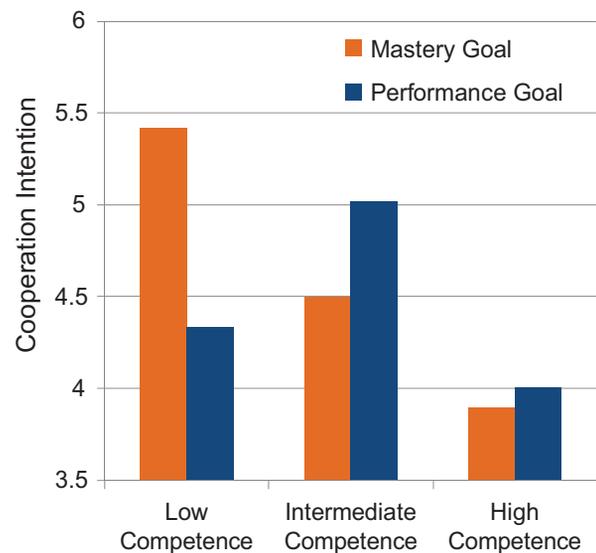


Fig. 2. Intention to cooperate as a function of type of achievement goal (mastery vs. performance) and level of competence.

Conclusions and Future Directions

On the basis of the lines of research that have been reviewed in this paper, we argue that although mastery goals are defined and operationalized as individualistic goals (“improve yourself”), in *social* contexts mastery goals clearly lead to a variety of beneficial outcomes relative to performance goals, such as active efforts to integrate difference of opinions and build relationships and stronger endorsement of reciprocity norms. In contrast, performance goals can result in the endorsement of maladaptive social behaviors such as destructive conflict regulation—hindering them in their work—and exploitation of others. This research thus supports the idea that achievement goals not only affect individual outcomes but also strongly predict interpersonal behaviors. So, although mastery goals conceptually have an individualistic nature, these goals lead to perceptions of positive interdependence, and hence individuals with mastery goals may use actors in the achievement environment to aid their learning and boost their performance. In contrast, given perceptions of negative interdependence that accompany performance goals, performance-driven individuals will presumably perceive others more strongly as adversaries and accordingly may behave in more competitive ways.

Of course, to offer the simplistic suggestions that mastery goals should be promoted and performance goals discouraged may be unrealistic. Moreover, it could lead to counterproductive effects. For example, the strong social value teachers associate with mastery goals can encourage students to report endorsing such goals not because they truly pursue them but only because of social desirability (Dompnier et al., 2009). Also, creating climates that exclusively focus on mastery goals may be in practical conflict with organizational and academic realities (cf. Darnon et al., 2009; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). However, we argue that although research has

pointed out that performance goals may have links with task performance (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; also see Yeo, Loft, Xiao, & Kiewitz, 2009), it is important to keep in mind that performance goals can produce less constructive or even destructive outcomes in terms of interpersonal behaviors.

Finally, we point to three important research avenues for possible future investigations. First, individuals often pursue multiple goals (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001) by striving simultaneously for mastery and performance. We believe that future research on interpersonal effects of achievement goals could profit from considering possible multiple-goal effects. Recently, Darnon and colleagues (2010) showed that mastery goals predicted interest in social comparison only when they are associated with performance goals. Future research has to explore more in depth how the mastery-goals effects on various interpersonal behaviors can be moderated by the level of endorsement of performance goals.

Second, given that achievement situations are often embedded in social contexts and that individuals are often interdependent with their peers and coworkers, future research designs should not only focus on achievement goals at the individual level but also on achievement goals at a group, team, or class level. In particular, we have discussed how at an interindividual level, performance goals are associated with harmful social behaviors. At an intergroup level, performance goals might strengthen intergroup competition and consequently also increase prejudice and discrimination. Mastery goals, on the other hand, should not.

As a final point, very often in natural settings different persons occupy different statuses in a hierarchy. So far, the question of status has been largely neglected in research on goals. However, mastery and performance goals might differently affect people of various social statuses (e.g., women and men) or individuals who occupy various positions in a hierarchy (e.g., in high- vs. low-power positions). Notably, because they are associated with a focus on the task, mastery goals might be particularly beneficial for people in low-power positions, who are more susceptible to experience social situations as threatening than are those in high-power positions.

In this article, we have reviewed new studies that deal with interpersonal effects of achievement goals. We are confident that, as this specific field grows and matures, the understanding of social consequences of mastery and performance goals will eventually contribute to a greater understanding of achievement goals as a whole.

Recommended Reading

- Darnon, C., Dompnier, B., Delmas, F., Pulfrey, C., & Butera, F. (2009). (See References). Demonstrates that goals affect the way one is perceived by others in terms of both social utility and social desirability.
- Darnon, C., Muller, D., Schragger, S.M., Pannuzzo, N., & Butera, F. (2006). (See References). Illustrates how mastery and performance goals lead to different approaches to deal with task-related conflicts.

Elliot, A.J. (2005). (See References). A comprehensive history of the achievement-goal construct.

Poortvliet, P.M., Janssen, O., Van Yperen, N.W., & Van de Vliert, E. (2007). (See References). Explores the effects of achievement goals on information exchange behavior and identifies underlying mechanisms.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Mastery goals and performance goals have typically been portrayed, both implicitly and explicitly, as approach forms of regulation—that is, as goals directed toward positive or desirable events (Elliot, 2005). Accordingly, *performance-approach goals* reflect the desire to demonstrate superior competence relative to others, whereas *mastery-approach goals* reflect the desire to develop competence by mastering new situations. Because the present article focuses on approach goals—the goals that have been the most developed in the literature—performance-approach goals will be referred to as *performance goals* and mastery-approach goals as *mastery goals*.

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