

M

Mastery Goals

P. Marijn Poortvliet
Sub-department Communication, Philosophy,
and Technology, Centre for Integrative
Development, Wageningen University,
Wageningen, The Netherlands

Synonyms

[Learning goals](#); [Mastery orientation](#); [Self-improvement goals](#); [Task goals](#)

Definition

Mastery goals are aimed at attaining a standard of competence defined by self-improvement or skill development. Individuals who hold mastery goals either seek task-related self-improvement or strive to gain task mastery.

Introduction

When individuals find themselves in an achievement situation, they will often set goals that give direction to their efforts. 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

(Elliot 2005). In the achievement goal literature, two types of goals have by far received the most attention: mastery goals and performance goals. Mastery goals involve the aim of improving one's own performance and gain task mastery, whereas performance goals reflect the pursuit of outperforming others and display superior performance (Ames 1992; Dweck 1986; Nicholls 1984). This entry will focus on mastery goals and discuss how these types of goals are positioned in broader motivational theory, how mastery goals are conceptualized, and the consequences of mastery goal pursuit.

Historic Development

Developed mainly within educational research programs, mastery goals are widely considered to affect individual and social achievement outcomes in contexts as diverse as organizational behavior, sport, and classroom functioning. Early research on how children cope with experiences of failure showed that two main types of patterns could be observed: so-called "helpless" and "mastery" responses (Dweck 1986). The second type is characterized by attributing poor performance outcomes to a lack of effort, seeking subsequent challenge, and showing persistence in the context of failure. This response pattern was proposed to be prototypical of *learning goals* – a label that was later changed into mastery goals by most scholars (Hulleman

et al. 2010) – and aligns with the core idea of mastery goals: seeking task-related self-improvement or gaining task mastery. Mastery goals are relatively weakly associated with having a *fear of failure* and relatively strongly associated with an internal *locus of control* – the belief that one has agency in life – and likewise positively associated with holding an *incremental theory*, the belief that one can develop one’s skills and capacities through effort.

Conceptualization of Mastery Goals

One key conceptual distinction being made is between *mastery-approach* and *mastery-avoidance* goals. Individuals with mastery-approach goals are assumed to focus on the development of competence through mastering tasks and self-improvement, for example, athletes who try to beat their personal record and improve their running techniques and skills. In contrast, individuals with mastery-avoidance goals strive to avoid deterioration in task performance, or they want to avoid that they don’t increase their competence. Here, an example would be athletes who try to avoid deteriorating running times or who try to avoid no longer learning better running skills.

Another important distinction is that between mastery goals as an *overarching orientation* or that as a more *context-specific* goal. Here, an overarching orientation refers to the relatively stable and trait-like mastery goals that a person carries across different achievement domains, such as the person who tries to improve herself and develop skills whether she is at work, doing sports, or in interpersonal relationships. Context-specific goals are goals that people set for themselves in particular situations; for example, a person may strive for strong mastery goals when following a language course, but in other contexts, he may not particularly strongly pursue a mastery goal or set other achievement goals instead. While individuals can be characterized as having relatively weak or strong mastery orientations and, thus, carry a mastery personality that is quite stable, most evidence points in the direction of a situation-specific conceptualization of mastery

goals because they are heavily driven by contextual characteristics of the achievement situation. For example, research has shown that the motivational climate at schools and the way performance of students is measured and rewarded serve as drivers for the adoption of specific achievement goals (Darnon et al. 2012).

The pursuit of mastery goals does not rule out the simultaneous adoption of other achievement goals; this idea is referred as the *multiple-goal* perspective. For example, athletes can (and perhaps should) have a strong desire to win (i.e., a performance goal) and at the same time may strive to increase their skills (i.e., a mastery goal). Related to this, empirical findings show that the goal adoption process over time and situations may fluctuate depending on many different contextual factors, such as performance expectancies and receiving performance feedback.

Mastery Goal Outcomes

Since the early days of achievement goal research, scholars have examined to what extent mastery goals are beneficial, in which contexts, and when these goals should be promoted in achievement situations (Senko et al. 2011). Of course, the answer to this question depends on the outcome variable under study. People who strive for mastery goals predominantly compare their present performance with their own previous performance or an absolute task standard and thus develop a self-referenced or task-referenced focus in achievement situations. For example, a student could compare his last course grade to previous marks (i.e., self-referenced standard) or to the maximum score on a particular test (i.e., task-referenced standard). Given the particular focus of people with mastery goals, such goal pursuit evokes distinct perceptual-cognitive frameworks with which individuals approach achievement situations, how they appraise task execution and achievement, and how they construct exchanges with other individuals (Poortvliet and Darnon 2010). Self-evidently, mastery goal research has focused on different kinds of outcome criteria to map the effects of mastery goal pursuit.

Traditionally, the vast majority of achievement goal studies have focused on intrinsic motivation and individual performance as outcome variables. Studies have consistently found that mastery goals have a robust positive relationship with intrinsic motivation and task interest, whereas a positive relationship between mastery goals and level of task performance was not always found, or this relationship turned out to be rather weak. Initially, the difference between mastery goals and performance goals led to different factions of researchers and practitioners who either called for fostering mastery goals (for instance, in classroom contexts), because these are stronger associated with intrinsic interest, while others argued for the promotion of performance goals because early evidence suggested that these were the best predictor of task performance. However, in recent years more systematic investigations have elucidated a somewhat more comprehensive picture concerning the individual performance effects of mastery goals. Recent meta-analyses indicated (e.g., Van Yperen et al. 2014) that mastery-approach goals were generally positively related to performance outcomes, whereas mastery-avoidance goals had a negative association with performance attainment.

Within the achievement goal approach, another important outcome domain that receives research attention is interpersonal behavior. Mastery goals are often pursued in social situations (e.g., research teams, student groups, and sport teams), and a variety of outcomes of it have now been documented (Poortvliet 2013). For one thing, when task-related conflict arises, mastery goals predict epistemic conflict regulation, which means that one tries to find out whether different points of view can be integrated into a joint solution (Darnon et al. 2006). Furthermore, in academic contexts, mastery goals were found to be related to having the attitude that cheating is unacceptable (Murdock and Anderman 2006). Mastery goals have also been shown to correlate positively with the inclination to help others, to cooperate, and to share knowledge, especially when individuals with mastery goals experience that their performance can still be further improved (Poortvliet et al. 2009). Another line

of research has shown that mastery goals lead to task-related information sharing and being less suspicious toward information exchange partners (Poortvliet et al. 2007). Also, investigations in work settings have shown that, unlike performance goals, mastery goals are associated with backing up behavior, the willingness to help team members who are apparently failing to perform well by offering resources and effort (Porter 2005). Other organizational studies showed that mastery goals drive the development of high-quality exchange relationships between colleagues, which may result in reports of higher job satisfaction, more organizational commitment, more work engagement, and relatively low levels of burnout (Janssen and Van Yperen 2004; Poortvliet et al. 2015).

Conclusion

Within the achievement goal tradition, mastery goals remain an important class of goals that continue to receive a great deal of research attention. This tradition has moved from a somewhat polarized landscape in which researchers and practitioners strongly endorsed either performance goals or mastery goals, into a more balanced field in which different goals are appreciated for their own merits. With developments such as the multiple-goal perspective (individuals can simultaneously hold different goals), insights into dynamics of goal setting (goal strength can fluctuate over time and between contexts), and more fine-grained understanding of effects of mastery goals on task interest, task performance, and social dynamics, mastery goals continue to be valued as a predominantly adaptive motivational tool, while knowledge of boundary conditions also permit more appropriate and specific advice when mastery goals should be assigned and fostered or avoided.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Achievement Goals](#)
- ▶ [Achievement Motives](#)

- ▶ Achievement Orientation
- ▶ Need for Achievement
- ▶ Performance Goals
- ▶ Personality and Academic Performance
- ▶ Personality and Job Performance

References

- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*, 261–271.
- Darnon, C., Müller, D., Schrager, S. M., Pannuzzo, N., & Butera, F. (2006). Mastery and performance goals predict epistemic and relational conflict regulation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 98*, 766–776.
- Darnon, C., Dompnier, B., & Poortvliet, P. M. (2012). Achievement goals in educational contexts: A social psychology perspective. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 6*, 760–771.
- Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist, 41*, 1040–1048.
- Elliot, A. J. (2005). A conceptual history of the achievement goal construct. In A. J. Elliot & C. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation* (pp. 52–72). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hulleman, C. S., Schrager, S. M., Bodmann, S. M., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2010). A meta-analytic review of achievement goal measures: Different labels for the same constructs or different constructs with similar labels? *Psychological Bulletin, 136*, 422–449.
- Janssen, O., & Van Yperen, N. W. (2004). Employees' goal orientations, the quality of leader-member exchange, and the outcomes of job performance and job satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal, 47*, 368–384.
- Murdock, T. B., & Anderman, E. M. (2006). Motivational perspectives on student cheating: Toward an integrated model of academic dishonesty. *Educational Psychologist, 41*, 129–145.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1984). Achievement motivation: Conceptions of ability, subjective experience, task choice, and performance. *Psychological Review, 91*, 328–346.
- Poortvliet, P. M. (2013). Harming others' task-related efforts: The distinct competitive effects of ranking information on performance and mastery goal individuals. *Social Psychology, 44*, 373–379.
- Poortvliet, P. M., & Darnon, C. (2010). Toward a more social understanding of achievement goals: The interpersonal effects of mastery and performance goals. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 19*, 324–328.
- Poortvliet, P. M., Janssen, O., Van Yperen, N. W., & Van de Vliert, E. (2007). Achievement goals and interpersonal behavior: How mastery and performance goals shape information exchange. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*, 1435–1447.
- Poortvliet, P. M., Janssen, O., Van Yperen, N. W., & Van de Vliert, E. (2009). Low ranks make the difference: How achievement goals and ranking information affect cooperation intentions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*, 1144–1147.
- Poortvliet, P. M., Anseel, F., & Theuvs, F. (2015). Mastery-approach and mastery-avoidance goals and their relation with exhaustion and engagement at work: The roles of emotional and instrumental support. *Work & Stress, 29*, 150–170.
- Porter, C. O. L. H. (2005). Goal orientation: Effects on backing up behavior, performance, efficacy, and commitment in teams. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*, 811–818.
- Senko, C., Hulleman, C. S., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2011). Achievement goal theory at the crossroads: Old controversies, current challenges, and new directions. *Educational Psychologist, 46*, 26–47.
- Van Yperen, N. W., Blaga, M., & Postmes, T. (2014). A meta-analysis of self-reported achievement goals and nonself-report performance across three achievement domains (work, sports, and education). *PLoS ONE, 9*, e93594.