



Achievement Goals in Educational Contexts: A Social Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

Research on achievement goals usually defines mastery goals as the desire to acquire knowledge, and performance goals as the desire to outperform (or not to underperform) others. Educational contexts are most of the time social contexts, involving various persons and groups, of various hierarchical positions, and various cultural and ideological contexts. Surprisingly, most research in the achievement goal field has been conducted at an individual level of analysis. In the present paper, we will review the social consequences and antecedents of goal endorsement. This research indicates that goals strongly affect the way one behaves with co-learners. Moreover, it suggests that more than merely individual dispositions, goals reflect the social relation students have with other persons, institutions, and with the society to which they belong. We conclude this paper by setting an agenda for future achievement goal research.

Educational contexts are contexts in which competence is a highly valued outcome. When students work on an essay, a math problem, an exercise, or an exam, they might pursue several goals. Some of these goals relate to the search for competence, and they are often named “achievement goals”. The kind of goals that pupils and students pursue and the consequences of such goal adoption for educational behaviors has been a topic that stimulated a great deal of research. However, less research has been devoted to the *social origins* of such goal adoption and the *social outcomes* that may come with the pursuit of these goals. The research on achievement goals (Dweck, 1986; for a recent review, see Senko et al., 2011 or Hulleman et al., 2010) has classically defined two main classes of goals, mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals correspond to the desire to learn and acquire new knowledge, namely, to gain competence (mastery-approach) or not to lose competence (mastery-avoidance goals). Performance goals correspond to the desire to perform better (performance-approach goals) or not to perform more poorly (performance-avoidance goals) relative to others.¹ As an example, when doing a math exercise, one might be focused on the mastery of the task: trying to increase his or her math skills (mastery-approach goals) or not to forget what he or she has learnt in math (mastery-avoidance goals). But one might also focus on how he or she will do at this math exercise as compared to other students, and then try to do better (performance-approach goals) or not worse (performance-avoidance goals) than them. A huge amount of research has been conducted in this area (Elliot et al., 1999). In this research, goals are most of the time examined as antecedents of various school or task related behaviors (e.g., persistence following failure, efforts, interest, performance).

Whereas educational psychologists have been particularly prolific in the area, interestingly, achievement goals have not interested as many social psychologists. This is

surprising given that educational contexts are social contexts that involve various persons and groups of various positions from various cultural and ideological contexts. As suggested by Doise (1986) to fully understand a phenomenon, psychology research should articulate various levels of analyses of this phenomenon: individual level (e.g., focusing on individual differences), but also interpersonal (e.g., focusing on social relations with peers), positional (e.g., focusing on group status differences), or ideological (e.g., cultural contexts and values, norms) levels are important (for an example of such an articulation, see Quianzade & Mugny, 2004). Most research on the achievement goals has been conducted at an individual level of analyses but very few has been conducted at interpersonal, positional, or ideological levels, three levels of analyses that are considered as essential by social psychologists (Doise, 1986).

In the present paper, we will review recent research examining goals at “social” levels of analyses. First, we will study how analyzing goals at the four levels of analyses (individual, interpersonal, positional and ideological) can help us understand goal endorsement and goal effects. Then, we will discuss how such analysis can contribute to the debate of which goals should –or not– be promoted in the classroom. For that purpose, we will focus on the social consequences of achievement goal endorsement in an educational context as well as their social antecedents.

The Social Effects of Academic Achievement Goals

Let us start with the interpersonal level of analysis. Many studies in the area, be it earlier goal research or more recent work, focused on the effects of different goals on individual outcomes : task-interest (e.g., Butler, 1988; Harackiewicz et al., 2008), learning strategies (e.g., Elliot, 1999; Nolen, 1988), reaction to failure (Dickhäuser et al., 2011; Elliott & Dweck, 1988), emotions (Pekrun et al., 2006, 2009), or self-handicapping (Lovejoy & Durik, 2010; Midgley et al., 1996). However, as we have recently argued (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010), goals also affect interpersonal outcomes. For example, help seeking is positively linked to mastery goals and negatively to performance goals (Karabenick, 2003; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Roussel et al., 2011). It also appears more frequently in mastery rather than performance conditions (Butler & Neuman, 1995; Ryan et al., 2001). Even if not directly applied to educational contexts, recent research on help giving follows the same direction. According to Poortvliet et al. (2007, 2009), performance goals lead participants to develop an *exploitation orientation* – being suspicious about exchanging information with another person – while mastery goals lead participants to develop a *reciprocity orientation* – having the expectation that giving useful information will result in receiving useful information back. Performance goals can even motivate people to go so far as to tactically deceive exchange partners in order to outperform them (Poortvliet et al., 2012). Mastery goals, on the other hand, are positively associated with maintaining good work relationships with others, which in turn result in better performance and increased satisfaction (Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012).

Thus, achievement goals affect interpersonal behaviors in the classroom. This is probably the reason why they also influence the effects others have on one’s own perceptions and achievement in the class. For example, although both mastery and performance goals predict the search for social comparison information (Bounoua et al., forthcoming; Darnon et al., 2010; Régner et al., 2007), social comparison reduced the perception of one’s own competence and positive affect only in a performance goal context (Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1987). Moreover, Gabriele and Montecinos (2001) showed that low achievers benefit more from an interaction with high achievers when

the interaction occurs in a mastery goal context rather than in a performance goal context. Mastery goal instructions also led to more elaborated problem solving discussions and higher level of metacognitive control in a collaborative rather than performance oriented context (Harris et al., 2008).

Finally, our own research has demonstrated that goals predict different reactions to a disagreement with others – a situation referred to as “socio-cognitive conflict” (for a recent review, see Butera et al., 2010). Research on socio-cognitive conflict has indicated that conflict regulation can be “epistemic” (focused on problem solving, a form of regulation that can elicit learning) or “relational” (focused on threatening social comparison of competence between partners). We have demonstrated that mastery goals predicted epistemic regulation whereas performance goals predicted relational regulation (Darnon et al., 2006). Moreover, in a context promoting mastery goals, disagreement predicted epistemic regulation (Darnon & Butera, 2007). In such a context, conflict has a positive effect on one’s own learning (Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007). In conditions that enhanced performance goals, disagreement predicted relational regulation. In such conditions, conflict has a negative effect on learning (see also Darnon, Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade 2007).

To summarize, research supports that in academic contexts, goals significantly affect how individuals behave with others and how they benefit from interacting with them. The higher the mastery focus, the more students are willing to cooperate and the more they seem to use others as relevant sources of information. The higher the performance goals, the more students perceive others as threats, or as competitors, and the less they seem to benefit from their interactions with them. Since most educational tasks are conducted in the presence of others, these results are particularly important for understanding goals effects in classroom situations.

Academic Achievement Goals as the Product of the Social Contexts

Are goals changeable depending on what teachers’ want to promote in their classes? In this section, we will focus on the social antecedents of goals. We will see that various social interactions, social influence processes, and larger social structures and functioning can affect goal endorsement. We will review research, which indicates that goal endorsement is not an individual decontextualized motivation but instead it results from explicit or implicit social and environmental influences.

The studies that has so far examined the antecedents of goal endorsement focused mostly on individual characteristics, such as the need for achievement and fear of failure (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama 2008; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997), approach-avoidance temperament (Elliot et al., 2011), implicit theories of intelligence (Dweck, 1999), and perception of competence (Cury et al., 2006; Elliot & Church, 1997; Jagacinski et al., 2010). The effects of higher-level contextual factors, like group level norms and practices, have received less attention.

For one thing, research has pointed to the fact that individual goals may depend on the larger classroom goal structures (for reviews, see Ames, 1992; Maehr & Zusho, 2009; Meece et al., 2006; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). According to these authors, the goals that pupils and student endorse develop from their perceptions of various classrooms practices. Indeed, research has shown that the perception of a mastery goal climate generally correlates with the endorsement of mastery goals and the perception of the climate and teachers’ practices emphasizing performance goals generally correlates with the endorsement of performance goals (e.g., Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Kim et al., 2010; Luo

et al., 2011; Roeser et al., 1996) and sometimes with a reduction of mastery goals (Ciani et al., 2010). Moreover, classroom climate seems to strengthen personal goals effects (Lau & Nie, 2008; Murayama & Elliot, 2009). In this research, however, the perception of goal structure is most of the time measured by asking students to report their own perception of the classroom goal structure. One can not exclude that their actual goals bias their perception rather than vice versa (see Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006, for a discussion of this point).

Interestingly, in research where social antecedents are considered, these antecedents are still measured as individual perceptions: perception of parental style (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010; Kim et al., 2010; Régner et al., 2009) or cultural self-construal (Luo et al., 2011; Tanaka & Yamauchi, 2004). Does that mean that the only reasons why students endorse goals have to be found in particular personality characteristics or individual perceptions? Of course, we do not think so. Rather, we think that goals are also the result of a particular combination between environmental incentives and students' adaptation to the school system, to values encouraged by this system, and to the society to which they belong.

First, it is worth noting that several authors manipulate goals. These studies generally show that goal manipulations produce similar results as goal measurements (e.g., Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Darnon et al., 2010; Darnon Harackiewicz, et al., 2007; Harris et al., 2008). More importantly, this method implies that goals can change with explicit recommendations provided by the researchers. Moreover, some research manipulates experimental factors and then examines their effects on achievement goal endorsement. For example, it has been found that a positive feedback is sufficient to increase performance-approach (Van Yperen & Renkema, 2008) and a negative feedback is sufficient to reduce mastery goal endorsement (Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). Moreover, Butler (2006) showed that the anticipation of an evaluation based on progresses enhanced mastery goals whereas the anticipation of normative evaluation enhanced performance goals. Another article recently demonstrated that the anticipation of a grade (a normative evaluation) increased students' performance-avoidance goals but not performance-approach goals (Pulfrey et al., 2011). Some research has also shown that presenting a test as measuring "natural mathematical ability" (Brodish & Devine, 2009) or as a task on which men usually outperform women (Smith, 2006) activates, in women participants, the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about their own group, which increases performance-avoidance goal endorsement as compared to a condition in which the test is presented as measuring working memory capacity (i.e., a non-stereotypical task) or as a task on which men and women perform the same. Finally, some authors has shown that the implementation of a cooperative learning method within the classroom increased high school students' mastery goals (Nichols, 1996; Nichols & Miller, 1994) or that an intensive training of teachers in reform-minded education (which includes valuing efforts, using good evaluation practices) makes students less concerned with performance goals and more concerned with mastery goals compared to traditional classrooms or classrooms in which teachers received a less intensive training (Stipek et al., 1998). Thus, it seems clear that beyond individual characteristics or perceptions, communication or social influence strategies, as well as the use of various instructional designs, can orient students toward mastery and performance goals.

Moreover, it is important to note that when students publicly report pursuing achievement goals, they may not think only about what motivated them, but also about their audience. Indeed, achievement goals are not expressed in a social vacuum; instead, students can use them as communication tools directed toward others, especially their teach-

ers and peers. Particularly, in Darnon et al. (2009), students were asked to answer a goal scale while trying to prove they were nice students versus they had all the chances to succeed at University versus in a honest way. Furthermore, participants had to judge a target student who reported either high or low levels of each type of goals. Their results showed that mastery goals are characterized by both very high social desirability (they produce positive judgments in terms of sympathy) and social utility (they produce positive judgment in terms of competence, for additional information on the social desirability / social utility distinction, see Beauvois & Dubois, 2009). Consequently, students can report a high level of mastery goal endorsement for at least two reasons. Either they truly believe in their utility in a given educational context or they want to create a positive image of themselves to teachers. In a recent research (Dompnier et al., 2009), we observed that the link between mastery goals and grade increased when the perception of mastery goals as being useful also increased. Meanwhile, this link decreased with the increased perception of mastery goals being socially desirable. These results suggest that mastery goal endorsement can positively predict academic performance when students truly believe in the utility of mastery goals to succeed. However, these goals do not predict performance when students fake mastery goal endorsement to appear nice in their teachers' eyes.

Goal endorsement is not only affected by self-presentation concerns. It is also the reflection of what is required and functional in a given system (Darnon et al., 2009). Can the social functioning of the school system itself and its role in the society contribute to the adoption of different goals? In liberal societies, individuals are assigned to various positions in the social hierarchy. In a society where, paradoxically, equality is a very important value, one has to justify these differences in social hierarchy. The educational system plays a very crucial role in this process. Indeed, the role of educational system is to orient different people to different positions within the society. Although these positions often reflect social origins rather than real merit, the fact that the repartition is done through the educational system gives legitimacy to these differences and makes them appear as reflecting pure merit and thus, as being just. Consequently, the role of the educational system is not only to teach students skills and knowledge (i.e., the "educational" function), but also to serve a "selection" function (Dornbusch et al., 1996). We argue that such a function encourages not only the adoption of mastery goals but also the endorsement of performance goals.

In a set of five studies (Darnon et al., 2009), we have shown that teachers tend to explicitly recommend that students endorse mastery goals but not performance goals. In spite of that, students still perceive performance-approach goals as an indicator of success at the University (see also Dompnier et al., 2008). In the same vein, Bernardo and Ismail (2010) recently showed that performance goals are higher in a culture where University is highly selective (Malaysia) compared to a less selective culture (the Philippines). They showed that such differences in goal endorsement are actually due to differences in the perception of what people think of students endorsing different types of goals in these two cultures.

In a meta-analysis, Dekker and Fischer (2008) showed that goals were also linked to various cultural values. Performance-approach goals were higher in embedded cultures (where individuals feel strongly connected to their groups, to collective values) compared to cultures valuing autonomy. Mastery goals were more strongly related to the egalitarian (versus hierarchical) dimension. Interestingly, the authors also found that performance-approach goals were higher in less developed countries. They suggested that the limited

access to resources could explain this result, supporting, again, an interpretation in terms of selection.

Taken together, these results show that when participants answer an achievement goal scale, this reflects not only their individual motivation, but also the social relation with the person who will read their answers (i.e., most of the time their teacher), the institution (school, high school, university, and more generally, the educational system), and more largely to the society they belong to. More generally, taking into account the social context in which achievement goals are expressed offers new answers to questions left unexplained by past research and opens avenues for future research in the field.

Avenues for Future Research

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, most research conducted in the achievement goal area have been conducted, analyzed, and interpreted at an individual level (Doise, 1986). The interpersonal, positional, and ideological levels of analyses have received less attention in the area. Fortunately, the recent interest of some social psychologists in the goal area has led to reconsidering achievement goal theory at least at two levels. First, at an interpersonal level, research has now demonstrated that goals affect social relations between peers and the effects of others on one's own learning. Furthermore, at an ideological level of analyses, research has now been engaged to examine, notably, whether the function of school in the society can affect the goals students endorse and the social value associated with these different goals.

These are the first steps in the examination of goals from a social psychological perspective. Notably, research conducted at the positional level of analysis is still dramatically lacking. Future research will have to focus particularly on this level of analyses. There are, indeed, some indications suggesting that the status of the group one belongs to might act both as an antecedent and as a moderator of goals effects. For instance, some results suggest that boys or men are more likely to adopt performance-approach goals and less likely to adopt mastery goals compared to girls or women (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Roeser et al., 1996) while girls are more likely to endorse performance-avoidance goals (Smith, 2006). Moreover, because socio-economic status relates to self-efficacy (Robbins et al., 2004) or self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002), one can expect it to correlate with goal endorsement, particularly with performance-avoidance goal endorsement, as suggested by Elliot (1999). Future research should focus on social status as an antecedent of goal endorsement.

Still considering a positional level of analysis, future research should also examine social status as a potential moderator of goal effects. It has often been argued (e.g., Nicholls, 1979, 1984) that an education centered on mastery goals should favor the achievement of all students, and not only the achievement of an elite or privileged groups. In line with this idea, some research suggests that women, more than men, suffer from the effects of performance goals (e.g., Jagacinski et al., 2008; see also Midgley et al., 2001) and benefit from mastery goals inductions (Patrick et al., 1999). Nevertheless, additional research needs to clearly establish whether social status acts as a moderator of goals effects.

The research presented in the current paper opens new perspectives and greatly contributes to the understanding of achievement goals in educational contexts. In addition, we think it contributes to an important debate that has been ongoing in this field for the last 15 years (e.g., Brophy, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Kaplan & Middleton, 2002; Senko et al., 2011). This debate concerns mainly the issue of whether mastery and performance goals result in positive versus negative outcomes, and thus, whether they should

be promoted in classrooms. Indeed, at the origin of the theory, (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984), achievement goal authors considered mastery goals to engender a pattern of positive, adaptive responses. Meanwhile, performance goals were believed to induce less adaptive behaviors. However, the data not always supported these initial predictions. Based on the distinction between performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals (Elliot 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), some authors have then attempted to revise the theory (Harackiewicz et al., 1998), arguing that both mastery and performance-approach goals can result in some positive academic outcomes, whereas performance-avoidance goals lead to negative outcomes. According to these authors, mastery goals have positive effects on some outcomes (including interest) but fail to predict achievement. Performance-approach goals on the other hand, do. However, this revision has encountered much resistance from the proponents of what is often referred to as the “normative” or “traditional” perspective. We think that analyzing goals from a social psychology perspective can help clarify this debate at least in two ways.

First, the answer to the question of which goals should be promoted could change dramatically when the outcome is a social variable. For example, performance-approach goals can positively affect academic performance. However, as we have seen, they also predict exploitation orientation and destructive forms of conflict regulation while reducing help seeking. If performance is considered a “positive outcome”, competitive relationships are usually not. More importantly, this debate focuses on the question of what goals should be promoted in classrooms but as we have seen in the second part of this manuscript, this is not a matter of what teachers tell students to do. Several contextual and cultural factors influence students’ adoption of performance goals beyond teachers’ discourses. Knowing that, we think more attention should be paid to the context as well as the role of education structures in the society, rather than to what teachers should or should not promote in their discourses. We do think that as long as schools serve a selection function, teachers’ attempts to discourage students to endorse performance goals will be futile. Such practices will certainly affect the way students respond to goal scales (Darnon et al., 2009; Dompnier et al., 2008) but will probably not change the goals they really perceive as useful and therefore really endorse.

Generally, we think it does not make much sense to focus on “adaptive” or “maladaptive” goals without taking into account the social and societal context in which they are endorsed and pursued. Indeed, goals are not “good” or “bad” *per se*. All is a matter of what is actually expected, and thus “adaptive”, in the school context. As an example, self-handicapping has deleterious effects on learning and task engagement, which explains it is considered as a negative, maladaptive outcome, but it is somehow adaptive for self-esteem in a system where school performance is considered as an indication of one’s own value. Cheating, an outcome that is usually linked to performance goals (Anderman & Danner, 2008; Murdock & Anderman, 2006), is maladaptive for many reasons, including non-compliance to societal rules, but it might still be adaptive for receiving good grades at school. In the same vein, exploitation orientation is certainly an “undesirable” outcome. However, exploitation orientation can be considered adaptive in school where competition is the rule.?

As we have argued in the present paper, education situations are fundamentally social situations, involving other persons (e.g., peers) who can hold various positions in a hierarchy (e.g., teachers) and act according to an institution (e.g., school) that plays a specific role in the society (e.g., the role of selecting people based on a supposed merit). In this sense, we highly encourage research in the area to “de-focus” from the traditional,

individual perspective. Even if such a perspective is important, we do believe it is not sufficient to clearly understand why students endorse different goals and what their effects are on various outcomes. The articulation of the four levels of analyses (Doise, 1986) thus appear to us as a very good way to draw a more complete picture of what really happens when students work on an academic achievement task.

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Short Biographies

Céline Darnon works at the intersection between social and educational psychology. She is particularly interested in how social psychology can contribute to answer some unresolved issues in educational psychology and vice versa. Her current research focuses on the social value of achievement goals as well as social status as an antecedent and moderator of goal effects. She obtained her PhD in experimental social psychology at the University of Grenoble. During her PhD, she spent 6 months as a research fellow at the University of Geneva. She then did a post-doc at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Céline Darnon has taught several courses on social psychology, social influence, social psychology of education and motivation. She is currently assistant professor at Clermont University and a member of the French University Institute.

Benoit Dompnier's main research interests concern social judgment and motivation in educational contexts. One particularity of his work is to look at intrapersonal processes from interpersonal and societal perspectives. He has done research on social value, social judgment norms, scholastic judgments and achievement goals. His current research focuses on the strategic use of achievement goals and causal explanations as communication tools in educational settings. Benoit Dompnier obtained his Master degree in Psychology at University of Savoy and his PhD in Experimental Social Psychology at University of Grenoble. He is currently assistant professor at University of Lausanne where he teaches social psychology, methodology and statistics.

Marijn Poortvliet's main interests revolve around the interpersonal effects of achievement goals, in particular the effects of those goals on help giving behavior, cooperation, and investment in exchange relationships. He has also done research on competitive effects of mastery and performance goals, like behaviors targeted at sabotaging others' performance and deceptive behaviors. Some of his previous research has dealt with the social consequences of personal uncertainty and with counterproductive effects of thwarted belonging. Currently, he is also developing a research program around psychological aspects of risk perception and risk communication. Marijn has taught courses on the self, group dynamics and risk communication. Marijn Poortvliet obtained his MSc in Social Psychology at Utrecht University and his PhD in work and organizational psychology at the University of Groningen. He worked at Tilburg University and he currently works at Wageningen University as an assistant professor.

Endnotes

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¹ It is worth noting that in this literature, several different definitions of achievement goals are adopted. In the present article, we will consider achievement goals as grounded in competence and as aims rather than reasons for achievement behaviors (Elliot, 2005).

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