Performance-Approach Goals: Good For What, For Whom, Under What Circumstances, and At What Cost?

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Some researchers have called for a reconceptualization of goal theory that acknowledges the positive effects of performance-approach goals. The authors of the present article review studies that indicate that performance-approach goals are associated with adaptive patterns of learning but note that, in other studies, these goals have been unrelated or negatively related to the same outcomes. There is a need to consider for whom and under what circumstances performance goals are good. There is some evidence that performance-approach goals are more facilitative for boys than for girls, for older students than for younger students, in competitive learning environments, and if mastery goals are also espoused. The authors describe the cost of performance-approach goals in terms of the use of avoidance strategies, cheating, and reluctance to cooperate with peers. They conclude that the suggested reconceptualization of goal theory is not warranted.

Over the past two decades, achievement goal theory has emerged as a preeminent approach to motivation (Elliot, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Weiner, 1990). This theory has developed within a social–cognitive framework that emphasizes the importance of how individuals think about themselves, their tasks, and their performance. Rather than conceiving of individuals as possessing or lacking motivation, the focus is on why individuals are motivated (Ames, 1992a, 1992b; Dweck, 1986; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1989). We define achievement goals as the purposes for behavior that are perceived or pursued in a competence-relevant setting. In this article, we do not separate the research on personal goals (goals that are pursued) from the research on goal structures (goals that are perceived).

Theorists have described two achievement goals in particular: the goal to develop ability (variously labeled a "mastery goal," "learning goal," or "task goal") and the goal to demonstrate ability or to avoid the demonstration of lack of ability (variously labeled a "performance goal," "ego goal," or "ability goal"). Although there are some differences among achievement goal theorists regarding the exact nature and functioning of these two types of goals, for the most part, there is considerable overlap among these different conceptions (Ames, 1992b; Heyman & Dweck, 1992).

Mastery goals focus the individual on the task at hand and relate especially to developing competency and gaining understanding and insight. Performance goals focus the individual on the self and relate especially to how ability is judged and how one performs, especially relative to others. These achievement goals are associated with different patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Some theorists have described performance goals in terms of both approach (an orientation to demonstrating ability) and avoidance (an orientation to avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability) components (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Nicholls, Patashnick, Cheung, Thorkildsen, & Lauer, 1989). However, until recently, most of the research using a goal orientation framework failed to make this distinction. Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) pointed out this discrepancy between the theory and the research and used classic motivational theory (e.g., Atkinson, 1974; McClelland, 1951) to provide a rationale for including both the approach and avoidance components in research on performance goals. This article focuses in particular on the approach component of performance goals.

There has been remarkable consistency, over a host of studies, regarding the relation between a mastery goal orientation and adaptive patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior (referred to in this article as "patterns of learning"). Those results have been summarized by others (e.g., Ames, 1992b; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Urdan, 1997a) and are not described in detail here. In addition, recent research assessing both the approach and avoidance components of performance goals is consistent in providing evidence of the maladaptive patterns of learning associated with performance-avoid goals (e.g., Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997). In this article, we review research that is less consistent and more controversial: the relation between performance-approach...
goals and adaptive or maladaptive patterns of learning. Do performance-approach goals play a positive role in adaptive motivational functioning? To answer this question, we must ask, "Adaptive for what, for whom, under what circumstances, and at what cost?"

In this article, we review the research that bears on these questions. This is not a review article in which every relevant study is cited and described. Rather, our aim is to provide an overview of the relevant research and to point to overarching themes and questions that will help explain the nature of performance-approach goals and guide future research on their effects.

Performance-Approach Goals: Good for What?

In this section, we provide an overview of studies that have found a positive association between performance-approach goals and adaptive patterns of learning. We do not cite the studies that have found no effects or negative effects of performance-approach goals on the same outcomes because that is not the aim of this article; however, we do note that the results are inconsistent. As we reviewed the literature, we were unable to find patterns that explain the inconsistent results. In some of the studies that have found positive effects of performance-approach goals, mastery goals have been associated with even more positive outcomes. However, in most survey studies, mastery and performance goals have not been correlated or have been moderately positively correlated. Thus, we agree with Harackiewicz and her colleagues (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998) that it is appropriate to examine the effects of performance goals independently of the effects of mastery goals. Later in this article, we consider the effect of combinations of goals and ask whether multiple goal profiles provide insights into the adaptive or maladaptive effects of performance-approach goals.

Scattered across experimental, survey, observational, and interview studies, there is some evidence that performance goals are associated with adaptive patterns of learning. For example, performance goals have been associated with adaptive outcomes such as positive self-concept, affect, attitudes, and the valuing of academic work (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985; Pajares, Britner, & Valiante, 2000; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Roesser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Skaalvik, 1997; Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996). In addition, performance goals have been positively related to effort (Bouffard, Boisvert, Vezau, & Larouche, 1995; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). It should be pointed out that, in other studies, performance goals have been unrelated or negatively related to these outcomes. It also should be pointed out that the nature of the effort that is expended may be important. It makes sense that students who want to demonstrate their ability will try hard and persist, but they may try hard to utilize strategies that are not likely to foster deep understanding or long-term learning. This issue of the "qualitative" nature of the outcomes under discussion is one that we raise again later as we consider the relation between performance goals and both strategy use and performance outcomes.

A number of studies have investigated the relation between performance-approach goals and the use of cognitive, metacognitive, and self-regulatory strategies, and the results have been reasonably consistent. Wolters et al. (1996) found a positive association between performance-approach goals and strategy use in English, social studies, and mathematics. However, they combined items assessing surface and deeper level strategies. Most studies have found that performance goals are unrelated to deep processing (Elliot et al., 1999, p. 550), but there are some exceptions. Archer (1994) found a positive relation between performance goals and "strategies that are generic to the process of learning and studying" (p. 435) in three samples of undergraduate students. Bouffard et al. (1995) examined the relation between performance goals and metacognitive strategy use and found a positive relation for boys. Meece, Blumenfeld, and Hoyle (1988) found a positive association between social/ego goals and students' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, they also found a positive relationship between performance goals and the use of superficial strategies. The positive relationship between performance goals and the use of superficial strategies has been found consistently (Elliot et al., 1999, p. 550). This raises an important issue. Is the use of surface-level processing positive in some cases? Elliot et al., for example, stated that "memorization and rote rehearsal seem well suited for some types of material and some types of exam formats" (p. 560). Garcia and Pintrich (1994) pointed out that "students do confront classroom tasks that call for the memorization of facts, names of places, foreign words, and so forth" (p. 140). Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, and Elliot (2000) acknowledged that "introductory college courses tend to rely on multiple-choice exams that may assess superficial rather than deep understanding" (p. 317). We cannot disagree with that. However, we do think this points to the importance of the question, "Good for what?" An orientation to demonstrating ability is consistently related to the use of superficial strategies such as memorization and rehearsal. Certainly, these strategies have instrumental value for some kinds of academic tasks and tests. The question is whether this instrumental value is sufficient to conclude that performance-approach goals are good.

In a number of studies, performance goals have been associated positively with outcomes closely related to achievement, such as academic self-efficacy, course grades, and test scores (Bouffard et al., 1995; Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2000; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 2000; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Roesser et al., 1996; Skaalvik, 1997; Wolters et al., 1996). Again, many other studies have found either no relation or a negative relation. Elliot and McGregor (1999) conducted perhaps the most interesting and provocative study that has looked at performance-approach goals and grades. They found that performance-approach goals were positively related to grades on an exam in introductory psychology. However, they also looked at these relationships in terms of "long-term retention," which was assessed by looking at grades on an unexpected pop quiz given near the end of the course, which included material from the exam given earlier. On the pop quiz, performance-approach goals were unrelated to grades, and mastery goals, which had been unrelated to grades on the first exam, were positively related. Elliot and McGregor concluded that "these results clearly implicate mastery goals, not performance-approach goals, as facilitators of retention" (p. 639).

1 In earlier studies, a distinction was not made between the approach and avoidance components of performance goals. More recent studies have made this distinction.
Harackiewicz, Elliot, and their colleagues, who have brought to the forefront the issue of the adaptive nature of performance-approach goals, have conducted both experimental and survey studies examining the relation between performance-approach goals and indicators of intrinsic motivation. In a number of their studies, no evidence emerged of a positive association between performance-approach goals and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 2000). For example, Harackiewicz et al. (2000) found that performance goals had no effect on students’ interest in psychology, enjoyment of the lectures, or the number of additional psychology courses taken. In their experimental studies, the results are often presented in terms of orthogonal contrasts, with the performance condition compared with the mastery condition or the performance-approach condition compared with the performance-avoid condition. For example, in a study involving puzzle solving, Elliot & Harackiewicz (1996) did not find evidence that the performance-approach condition had a less positive effect than the mastery condition on intrinsic motivation. They concluded that “these results counterweigh the prevailing position that performance goals per se are deleterious to intrinsic motivation” (p. 468). In a meta-analysis of experimental research that examined the effect of achievement goals on intrinsic motivation, Rawsthorne and Elliot (1999) found that performance goals had an undermining effect relative to mastery goals. However, they also looked at whether the experimental procedures induced a performance-approach or performance-avoid orientation. Performance-avoid goals were less facilitative of intrinsic motivation than were mastery goals; however, performance-approach goals and mastery goals had equivalent effects.

This “absence of an undermining effect” (Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999, p. 335) cannot be taken as evidence that performance-approach goals facilitate intrinsic motivation. This distinction between “performance goals are good” and “performance goals are not bad” is one that needs to be considered. Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) went on to say that a clear, comprehensive understanding of the effects of goals on intrinsic motivation demands a careful consideration of situational and individual-difference moderators (p. 978). The failure to do this may have, in many studies, contributed to the inconsistent results described earlier. In the next section, we consider some of the individual and situational moderators of performance-approach goals by addressing the question of for whom and under what circumstances performance goals are associated with adaptive patterns of learning.

**Perceived Competence**

That the effect of performance-approach goals is positive for students high in perceived competence and negative for those low in perceived competence has been a long-standing hypothesis (Covington & Omelich, 1984; Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Nicholls, 1983, 1984). For example, in an experimental study in which goals were manipulated, Elliott and Dweck (1988) found that individuals in the mastery goal condition displayed an adaptive pattern regardless of their perceived skill at performing the task. However, the pattern exhibited by individuals in the performance goal condition depended on their perceived skill. Individuals under the performance goal condition who assessed their skill as high exhibited adaptive patterns, whereas those who assessed their skill as low exhibited maladaptive patterns. Some studies have provided support for this moderator variable hypothesis (Bergin, 1995; Covington & Omelich, 1984; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Smiley & Dweck, 1994). However, other experimental and survey studies have failed to replicate this result (Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Harackiewicz et al., 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 2000; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993; Kaplan & Midgley, 1997; Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993; Miller, Greene, Montavalo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996). For example, Bandura and Dweck (1985), in a study in which goal preferences were measured, found that performance goals were associated with the avoidance of challenge, even in participants with high levels of confidence. We agree with Miller et al. (1993) that “additional research designed to tease out the interaction is clearly needed” (p. 11).

**Gender and Ethnicity**

As pointed out by Pintrich and Schunk (1996, p. 247), there is very little empirical research on differences in goal orientation by gender or ethnicity. Regarding the question of whether there is evidence that performance-approach goals are more facilitative for boys than for girls, Urdan (1997b) reported that, for boys, there was a positive relation between performance-approach goals and associating with friends with a positive orientation toward school; however, he did not find such a relation for girls. Similarly, Bouffard et al. (1995) found that, for boys but not for girls, performance goals were positively related to the reported use of metacognitive strategies. They concluded that “although adhesion to learning goal has a positive impact on self-regulation both for girls and boys, for the latter, adhesion to performance goal can also be helpful” (p. 317). Graham (1994), in an extensive review of studies of the motivation of African American students, concluded that “some of the current themes that dominate the study of motivation—such as... the goals to which individuals strive—have been too sparsely examined among African Americans to make a review of findings possible” (p. 56). Certainly, that is also true for other ethnic minorities in this country and for individuals from other countries and diverse cultural backgrounds. In a study including Aboriginal, Anglo-, and immigrant Australian students’ achievement goal orientations, McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, and Van

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2 In some cases, researchers have used grade-point average, rather than perceived competence, to test this moderating effect. These two constructs, although not the same, are positively correlated (Harsfors & Hattie, 1982).
Eten (1998) found that an orientation to performance goals predicted intentions to complete schooling and grades in math and English for the Anglo group but not for the other groups. In another study that included those three groups of Australian students as well as groups of Navajo students from the United States and Montagnais Betsiamite Indians from Quebec, Canada, McInerney, Roche, McInerney, and Marsh (1997) found that the relation between goal profiles and achievement for these diverse groups was more similar than different (p. 233). In our program of research on achievement goals, conducted with a large sample of African American and European American adolescents, we have considered the role of ethnicity in a host of studies. Except for some minor differences between the two ethnic groups in the relations between performance goals and outcomes (e.g., Kaplan & Maehr, 1999), we have found no evidence that performance-approach goals are more facilitative for students of one ethnic background than another. Clearly this is an understudied area of research on achievement goals, conducted with a large sample of children.

Age and Context

The question of developmental or age effects is an important one. It was once thought that young children, because they are limited in their cognitions about ability and achievement, are not affected negatively by an emphasis on the demonstration of ability (e.g., Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Nicholls, 1978). In a recent qualitative study that included classrooms ranging from the third to the eighth grade, Urdan, Kneisel, and Mason (1999) used videotapes and interviews with teachers and target students to examine the processes through which goal-oriented messages in the classroom were attended to, and affected, students. Preliminary analyses of the data indicated that the older students interpreted the performance-goal messages from their teachers differently than did the younger students. Urdan et al. did point out exceptions, however. Other studies have indicated that younger children as well as older children are susceptible to the effects of performance goals (Cain & Dweck, 1995; Smiley & Dweck, 1994). These researchers have suggested that a more general concern about self-worth in terms of “goodness” and “badness” may be sufficient to elicit goal-related negative reactions (Burhans & Dweck, 1995). There is evidence that as children enter early adolescence, they develop a more differentiated conception of the nature of ability, moving from equating ability and effort to an understanding of the notion of ability as capacity (Nicholls, 1984; Nicholls & Miller, 1983, 1984). These developmental differences are likely to impact the relation between students’ orientation to demonstrating their ability and their patterns of learning. Nicholls (1984) suggested that although these cognitive shifts in conceptions of ability are age related, the nature of the context influences which notion of ability individuals will invoke. Eccles and Midgley (1989; Midgley, 1993) cited evidence that the learning environment becomes more performance focused when students move up in grade level, and in particular, when they move to middle-level schools. Thus, for school-based studies, the effects of age are often confounded with the effects of differences in the learning environment across grades and school levels. Midgley et al. (1995) found that a performance goal orientation was unrelated to academic efficacy in a sample of elementary school students but was positively related to efficacy in a middle school sample in the same school district. In addition, middle school teachers and students perceived the school goal structure as more performance focused than did elementary school teachers and students. The differences in the relation between performance goals and self-efficacy for elementary and middle school students could reflect developmental differences or could be related to the different emphasis on performance goals in the two settings. That there were school-level differences in teachers’ perceptions of the goal structure lends credence to the role of differences in the learning environment. Harackiewicz et al. (1998) pointed to the competitive nature of the learning environment at the university level, particularly in introductory courses with a normative grading structure. They said that,

In this performance-oriented setting, students who adopt performance goals might actually be striving to attain good grades in a manner that is consistent with the classroom context, and a performance goal orientation might prove more adaptive than in other educational contexts. (p. 15)

Studies using cross-sectional or longitudinal designs could contribute to a better understanding of the role that age and context play in the relation between performance-approach goals and patterns of learning. Unfortunately, the studies to date that have been cross-sectional or longitudinal have done little to clarify these issues (e.g., Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Nicholls et al., 1985; Pajares et al., 2000; Wolters et al., 1996). We suggest that researchers interested in the positive effects of performance-approach goals design studies that will reduce the confound between age and context effects. Experimental studies might be particularly informative as a first step in that the context could be similar for students of various ages. Survey studies that follow students as they move up in grade and school level and assess both their personal goals and the goals that are extant in the learning environment could make an important contribution. Qualitative studies could incorporate the design used by Lehtinen, Vauras, Salonen, Oikinou, and Kinnunen (1995), in which students were interviewed and surveyed over a period of several years. Various methodologies could and should be used to address this important question.

Multiple Goals

Are performance-approach goals facilitative if mastery goals are also salient? Students do not pursue or perceive one goal or the other. In many of the survey studies, the main effects of a mastery goal orientation and a performance goal orientation are presented and interaction effects are not examined. Experimental studies typically compare individuals in one condition with those in another condition, not allowing for an examination of the effects of multiple goals. In contrast, the relatively few qualitative studies that have been conducted often give vivid descriptions of students pursuing multiple goals (e.g., Dowson & McInerney, 1997; Lee & Anderson, 1993; Levy, Kaplan, & Patrick, 2000).

Meece, Pintrich, and Wentzel (e.g., Meece et al., 1988; Meece & Holt, 1993; Pintrich, 2000; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Wentzel, 1991, 1993; Wolters et al., 1996) have taken the lead in urging researchers to consider the effects of multiple goals. The effects of multiple goals are assessed by using cluster analysis (comparing intraindividual patterns) or median splits (comparing individuals
with different patterns of high and low goals) or by looking at interactions between goal orientation variables in regression analyses. In a number of survey-based studies, the most facilitative pattern has been low performance/high mastery (e.g., Meece & Holt, 1993; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Wolters et al., 1996).

Of particular relevance to this article is evidence that performance goals are facilitative if mastery goals are also salient (Bouffard et al., 1995; Elliot & Church, 1997; Pintrich, 2000; Wentzel, 1991, 1993. Pintrich (2000) divided junior high school students into four groups (high mastery/low performance, low mastery/high performance, high/high, and low/low) based on median splits of their goal scores in eighth grade and examined changes in motivational beliefs, self-efficacy, task value, and test anxiety later in the eighth-grade year and in the ninth grade. Thus, he was able to determine whether the patterns of change over time were moderated by group membership at Time 1. For all the dependent variables, he found that high performance goals, when coupled with high mastery goals, were as adaptive as the combination of high mastery goals and low performance goals. This should not be interpreted as evidence of the facilitative effect of performance goals, but rather that performance goals are adaptive if mastery goals are also high. In addition, he found that the high/high group reported higher task value (a combination of items assessing interest, utility, and importance) than did the high mastery/low performance group. Bouffard et al. (1995) also used median splits and found that college students in the high performance/high mastery group received higher grades and reported using cognitive strategies significantly more than did any of the other groups. Similarly, Wentzel (1991, 1993) found that students who were high in both performance and mastery goals earned higher grades than did students who were high in mastery goals only or in performance goals only. These findings point to the facilitative nature of performance goals when combined with mastery goals.

Additional longitudinal studies are needed that examine developmental change as a function of multiple goals. Going beyond the study by Pintrich (2000), in which he used goal profiles at Time 1 to examine outcomes across time, it is important to acknowledge that patterns of goals may change across time; that is, as students move into different learning environments, their personal goals may reflect to some degree the newly experienced goal structure, or some students may experience an academic setback and adopt a more maladaptive goal profile.

Elliot and Church (1997) examined in regression analyses the interactions between goal variables and found that the combination of high performance-approach goals and low mastery goals was associated with the highest grades, whereas the combination of low performance-approach goals and high mastery goals was associated with the highest levels of intrinsic motivation. They suggested that “the optimal self-regulatory profile for participants in the present study may have been the simultaneous adoption of mastery and performance-approach goals” (p. 229). The interaction they reported belies that conclusion. The high/high profile would not be the most facilitative pattern for either outcome; that is, the adoption of mastery goals would undermine somewhat the positive effects of performance-approach goals on graded performance, and the adoption of performance goals would undermine somewhat the positive effects of mastery goals on intrinsic motivation. Again, it may be important to consider the nature of the outcomes.

Performance-Approach Goals: Good at What Cost?

Although we described studies in the “for what” section that indicated a positive relation between performance-approach goals and adaptive patterns of learning, we noted that there are other studies that provide evidence of a negative relation between performance goals and the same outcomes. The latter would be evidence of the “cost” of performance-approach goals. However, the inconsistent results led us to concentrate, in this section, on outcomes where the results are more consistent. We focus in particular on the relations between performance goals and avoidance behaviors, cheating, reluctance to cooperate with peers, and the question of whether an orientation to demonstrating ability becomes an orientation to avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability when students experience a setback.

Avoidance Behaviors and Strategies to Guarantee Success

Covington (1992) has described the strategies students use to protect self-worth when they pursue or perceive performance goals. With our colleagues, we have conducted a number of studies examining the relation between performance goals and these strategies.

Self-handicapping involves purposefully withdrawing effort (procrastinating, fooling around with friends instead of studying) so that if subsequent performance is low, those circumstances, rather than lack of ability, will be seen as the cause. These strategies are considered to be handicapping because they can undermine performance. In a series of studies, we found that an orientation to demonstrating ability, or perceiving an emphasis on performance goals in the learning environment, was associated with a greater reported use of self-handicapping strategies by students (Midgley et al., 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Midgley & Urdan, in press; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). In the Pintrich (2000) study, in which median splits were used to examine trajectories across three time points, students with high performance and high mastery goals at Time 1 reported less handicapping than did the other three groups at Time 3. It should be noted that none of these studies included the avoidance component of performance goals. In contrast, in a study by Midgley and Urdan (in press), both components were included. Although handicapping was positively correlated with both performance-approach and performance-avoid goals, the relationship with performance-avoid goals was stronger. In addition, in regression analyses, performance-avoid goals positively predicted handicapping, whereas performance-approach goals did not.

In a number of studies conducted by Dweck and her colleagues, including studies in which goals were manipulated (e.g., Elliott & Dweck, 1988) and those in which goals were measured (e.g., Bandura & Dweck, 1985; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), performance goals were associated with challenge avoidance and low persistence following failure. In a preliminary study using survey data, Gheen and Midgley (1999) found that when students perceived that their teacher emphasized the demonstration of ability in the classroom, they were more likely to report avoiding challenge and novelty.

Our colleague, Ryan (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997), has conducted studies examining students’ avoidance of help seeking in
the classroom. Students do need help at times, and if they avoid asking for help for fear of looking stupid, this may undermine achievement. Ryan and Pintrich (1997) found that many students perceived a threat to competence from both teachers and classmates when contemplating seeking help. An orientation to performance goals predicted a perceived threat from both peers and teachers, which in turn predicted the avoidance of seeking help. In a study by Ryan et al. (1998), in classrooms where the avoidance of help seeking was greater, students perceived more of an emphasis on performance goals. These studies did not include the avoidance component of performance goals. Middleton and Midgley (1997) found that both an orientation to demonstrating ability and an orientation to avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability were correlated positively with help avoidance. In regression analysis, the avoid component of performance goals predicted the avoidance of help seeking, and the approach component did not.

These studies point to the importance of including both components of performance goals in future studies to determine whether performance-approach goals exert an independent effect on the use of these debilitating strategies and to consider more generally the costs of performance-approach goals.

Covington (1992) also described strategies that protect self-worth by “guaranteeing success.” Stories of students who will not share their work or who falsify data to get into selective graduate school programs are common. Recent studies by Kaplan and his colleagues (Kaplan, Menda-Ben-Yakov, & Segal, 1999; Levy et al., 2000) found that performance-approach goals were associated with the desire to work alone and with less willingness to cooperate with a peer. This was particularly true when the peer was perceived to be of a different group or to possess different qualities than those of the student. In addition to an unwillingness to share their work with peers, students may engage in cheating to guarantee success. Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) found that performance-approach goals were grounded in both the motive to achieve and the fear of failure. In achievement settings where performance goals are emphasized, the fear of failure may be activated, and cheating may emerge as an option for some students. Schab (1991) reported that fear of failure was the most common reason for cheating among high school students. In a recent study, Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield (1998) found that perceiving classrooms as being extrinsically focused and perceiving schools as being focused on relative performance were associated with self-reported cheating.

In the studies just cited, the independent effects of performance and mastery goals were assessed. We don’t know, for example, if performance-approach goals are associated with cheating if mastery goals are also high, or if the positive relationship between avoiding seeking help in the classroom and performance goals is evident if mastery goals are also salient.

Performance-Approach Goals in the Face of a Setback

A very important question to consider is what happens to students oriented to demonstrating their ability when they experience a setback. Do these students maintain their performance-approach orientation in the face of negative evaluative feedback or an academic setback or do they adopt the debilitating performance-avoid orientation? Does perceived competence moderate this relationship? In the studies (described earlier) by Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Elliot & Dweck, 1988), students who were oriented to demonstrating their ability were vulnerable to a helpless response following failure. This was especially true when they had low confidence in their ability. We found that a performance-approach orientation in sixth grade predicted a performance-avoid orientation in seventh grade, but only for students high in academic efficacy (Middleton, Kaplan, & Midgley, 1998). The finding that this pattern was true in particular for high efficacy students is provocative given the different findings in the Dweck studies (Dweck & Elliot, 1983; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). When we were collaborating with a local elementary school to bring about school reform (Maehr & Midgley, 1996), we attended a memorable meeting at which the tearful mother of a very high-achieving student described what happened when he received his first “B.” She described his unwillingness to take risks or to take on really challenging work, fearing that he might not receive the coveted “A”. Many high-achieving students do experience setbacks. Empirical studies are needed that will shed light on this process and look at the effects on both higher and lower achieving students. This will help to inform thinking about the merits of performance-approach goals.

Summary

We have reviewed the literature and identified studies in which there is evidence that performance-approach goals are associated with adaptive patterns of learning. We noted that the results have been inconsistent and that, in other studies, performance-approach goals have been related negatively or have been unrelated to the same outcomes. In the case of effort, cognitive strategy use, and graded performance, we suggested that it is important to consider the nature of the outcomes. Are performance goals good if they are associated with trying hard to memorize, rehearse, and recall in order to score well on a test, even if there is limited long-term retention or understanding?

We pointed to the importance of considering for whom and under what circumstances performance goals are good. There is some evidence that performance goals are more facilitative for boys than for girls, for older students than for younger students, in competitive learning environments, and if mastery goals are also espoused. We noted the lack of information regarding the relative effect of performance goals on students from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures and the confound between developmental effects and context in the few cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that have been undertaken. We summarized the results of studies examining the effects of multiple goals. There is very little evidence that the combination of high performance and low mastery goals is the most facilitative pattern for any outcomes. Elliot and Church (1997) found this to be true for graded performance in a sample of college students but found the opposite pattern (low performance/high mastery) to be the most facilitative for intrinsic motivation. We suggested that rather than providing evidence of the facilitative nature of both goals, it instead provides evidence that espousing both goals may undermine both outcomes to some degree. This again points to the need to consider the quality of the outcomes.

In considering the cost of performance goals, we pointed to studies in which the results have been consistent; that is, we pointed to the cost of performance goals in terms of self-handicapping, the avoidance of novelty and challenge, the avoidance of help seeking, the use of cheating, and reluctance to
cooperate with peers. We highlighted the importance of examining what happens to students who are oriented to demonstrating their ability when they receive negative evaluative feedback or experience academic setbacks.

Final Thoughts

Is there evidence of the need to adopt a revised goal theory perspective (Harackiewicz et al., 1998; Pintrich, 2000)? We do not think so. We believe that the distinction between the approach and avoidance components of performance goals has informed our thinking and serves as an important revision of the goal theory perspective. However, those who call for a revised goal theory perspective point especially to the positive effects of performance-appraisal goals. We do not believe there is justification to revise the goal theory perspective to say that both mastery and performance goals are good. Research indicates that performance goals may be adaptive for certain students in certain circumstances as long as mastery goals are also high. This should not be interpreted as proof that it is facilitative for students to be oriented primarily to demonstrating their ability or facilitative for schools to emphasize relative ability and competition among students without emphasizing mastery goals. The concern is that the second part of the sentence—"as long as mastery goals are also high"—may get lost. Dweck has been saying for years that there is a place for both goals and that a problem arises only when "proving ability becomes so important to students that it drives out mastery goals" (Dweck, 1999, p. 152; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This is supported by our review of the literature on the effects of multiple goals. Are performance goals driving out mastery goals in schools? Ames (1987, 1992a) warned us a decade ago that performance goals were pervasive and mastery goals were weak in most schools. She cited the research of Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Meece, and Wessels (1982) and Good and Brophy (1987) as indicating that "the mastery orientation of many elementary school classrooms is weak at best" (Ames, 1992a, p. 330). In addition, there is evidence that the emphasis on performance goals increases and the emphasis on mastery goals decreases as students move up in grade level (e.g., Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Marachi, Ghee, & Midgley, 2000; Midgley et al., 1995). Certainly, the emphasis on relative ability and competition among students is alive and well at the university level.

Now researchers face a new challenge precipitated by the recent escalation in the emphasis on standards, testing, and accountability. We think a distinction needs to be made between standards rooted in mastery goals and standards rooted in performance goals. Standards that reflect mastery goals are important and necessary. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) articulated specific standards a decade ago that were based on the principle that it was more important for students to understand how they arrived at an answer than the answer itself. These standards were adopted in part or in whole by 49 states. The problem arises when there is a need to assess whether a student has achieved these standards. Good classroom teachers, if they have the opportunity to spend a reasonable block of time with their students, can do this. But when there is a massive testing program, such as is the case in many statewide testing programs, there is a movement away from mastery standards to standards based on facts and "right answers" that can be assessed with multiple-choice questions. In our recent conversations with teachers, they talk about how the testing and accountability movement has changed their teaching. Rather than promoting thinking, understanding, and creativity, they feel pressured to teach facts and test-taking strategies. The state puts pressure on the district, the district puts pressure on principals, principals put pressure on teachers, and teachers put pressure on students to demonstrate ability on these tests and to score better than others to look good in media accounts and to receive monetary rewards. To compound the problem, the NCTM, bowing to public pressure, has recently added strong language to its standards, "emphasizing accuracy, efficiency, and basic skills like memorizing the multiplication tables" (Hartocollis, 2000). What happened to understanding? Performance goals may indeed be driving out mastery goals.

The call for a reconceptualization of goal theory gives the message that it may be alright to emphasize the demonstration of ability and competition among students, when the important message may be that schools must pay greater attention to ways to enhance mastery goals. With very few exceptions, studies have documented the positive effects of mastery goals. In addition, we found that perceived change in the mastery goal structure (as students moved from one grade to another) was a more powerful predictor of changes in student outcomes than change in the performance goal structure. A perceived decline in the mastery goal structure was associated in particular with a negative pattern of changes in self-regulation, self-efficacy, positive and negative affect in school, and grades, both across the transition to middle school and during the middle school years (Urdan & Midgley, 2000). We have written often about the need to increase the emphasis on mastery goals in classrooms and schools (e.g., Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Midgley, 1993; Midgley & Edelein, 1998). We find it interesting that Church et al. (2000) found that mastery goals predicted grades in university classrooms taking part in a program designed to help maintain student interest and enrollment. They suggested that the instructors created a mastery environment, and thus, mastery goal pursuit yielded maximal benefits (p. 26). Perhaps classrooms like this will help to keep performance goals from overwhelming mastery goals, but they are all too rare. Rather than suggesting that performance-approach goals are good because they are related to grades in classrooms where relative ability is the name of the game, perhaps more attention should be paid to the kinds of classroom practices that will promote mastery goals. Those who suggest a reconceptualization of goal theory seem to be arguing that it is instrumental to pursue performance-approach goals in the performance-oriented schools and universities that are a fact of life today. We acknowledge that but suggest that, regardless of the level of emphasis on performance goals, more energy should be focused on enhancing mastery goals. Although mastery and performance goals are orthogonal in theory and research, schools and teachers today are often being forced to promote performance goals and abandon mastery goals.

We conclude by briefly considering two related issues. We revisit the question raised earlier regarding what happens when students who are oriented to demonstrating their ability experience a setback and discuss the implications in terms of recent attempts to separate the approach and avoidance dimensions of performance goals. There appears to be widespread agreement that students who pursue or perceive performance goals, regardless of their level of ability, may be vulnerable to negative outcomes in the face of an academic setback. For example, Heyman and Dweck (1992) stated that "in performance goal contexts, individuals are always vulner-
able to becoming overwhelmed by a failure experience” (p. 238). Pintrich (2000), in his examination of students with contrasting goal profiles, warned that “if this group of high-mastery/high-performance students began to consistently do poorly or fail, there may be some maladaptive outcomes” (p. 553). Dweck (1986) pointed to the growing vulnerability of performance-oriented children as they proceed through the grades:

It may be that only in subsequent school years will these maladaptive tendencies have their impact on achievement, when children with these patterns elect to avoid challenging courses of study, drop out of courses that pose a threat to failure, or show impairment of performance under real difficulty. Thus, our experimental studies may create conditions that good students will encounter only in later years but that reveal underlying patterns already in place in the grade school years. (p. 1044)

Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) speculated about this:

One of the most important issues related to perceived competence that awaits empirical exploration is the stability of the performance-approach orientation on receipt of negative feedback. Do individuals maintain a performance-approach goal in the face of failure or does this inevitably elicit a performance-avoidance orientation? (p. 472)

Do performance-approach goals become maladaptive by changing to performance-avoid goals? As we described earlier, we have evidence that performance-approach goals at one point in time predicted performance-avoid goals at a later point in time for students who were high in academic self-efficacy (Middleton et al., 1998). However, we have no knowledge of the factors that precipitated that change. What are the implications of these findings? Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) suggested that efforts be put into thinking about how to promote a performance-approach orientation in the classroom, rather than a performance-avoid orientation. That assumes, first of all, that some classrooms are perceived as putting particular emphasis on demonstration of ability (e.g., “it’s important that you look smart”), whereas other classrooms are perceived as putting particular emphasis on avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability (e.g., “it’s important that you don’t look dumb”). We have developed scales to assess students’ perceptions of these different emphases in the classroom (Middleton, Gheen, Midgley, Hruda, & Anderman, 2000), and we will use them to pursue this question. However, more important than this differential emphasis on performance-approach and performance-avoid goals in the classroom may be students’ experience of an academic setback of some sort. We do not think that Elliot and Harackiewicz would suggest that finding ways to keep students from experiencing academic setbacks is important. Indeed, learning from mistakes and figuring out what to do in the face of setbacks is integral to a mastery goal orientation. Our recommendation would be to put efforts into thinking about how to promote a mastery goal orientation in the classroom. Within a mastery framework, teachers can provide critical feedback to students about what is wrong with their work and how to improve it without reflecting on their ability (Dweck, 1999, p. 152). Less is known about how to create mastery situations in classrooms than how to affect the saliency of performance goals (e.g., Bergin, 1995). We call for an active and ongoing dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and policy makers regarding ways to promote mastery, effort, understanding, and challenge in the learning environment for all students.

Certainly these issues have relevancy beyond academic tasks and achievement-related beliefs and behaviors. Over a decade ago, Dweck and Leggett (1988) discussed the relevancy of their model to other domains, including the social and the moral. The question of whether performance-approach goals may serve a positive function in approaching not only school tasks but tasks in life in general is one that remains to be investigated.

References


