

“Socializing” Achievement Goal Theory: The Need for Social Goals

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Abstract Cultures shape the types of goals that students pursue in the classroom. However, research in achievement goal theory seems to have neglected this cultural aspect with its exclusive focus on individualistically-based goals such as mastery and performance goals. This emphasis on mastery and performance goals may reflect Western individualist psychological thinking. Thus, social goals, which may be more salient in collectivist cultures, are relatively neglected. There is a dearth of studies investigating the role of social goals in academic motivation, and the few studies that did explore them are somewhat problematic. This paper reviews research done within the achievement goal theory, considers the need for more studies on social goals, and concludes with the argument that social goals are important in understanding student motivation especially in collectivist cultures.

Keywords Social goals · Achievement goals · Socially-oriented achievement motivation · Cross-cultural motivation

Introduction

People from different cultures are motivated by different goals and strive to achieve them in different ways (Kitayama and Uchida 2004; Markus and Kitayama 1991). In the collectivist Asian setting for example, more relationally-based and group-oriented goals predominate, while in more individualistic Western contexts, personally-chosen goals that are in line with the individual's interests are more salient (Hui 1988).

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The goal construct has become a focal variable in psychological research (Elliot 2005). More specifically, it has also predominated theorizing on motivation within the school setting through the prominence of achievement goal theory (Hulleman et al. 2010). However, research in this area seems to neglect the recognition that people from different cultures are motivated by different types of goals. It seems to be dominated by an implicit, individualist Western psychological thinking through its exclusive focus on individually-based goals such as mastery and performance goals.

This article will review the current research done within the achievement goal theory, point out the need for including social goals in motivational research, and illustrate the weaknesses associated with the current research on social goals. This article argues that there is an urgent need to expand achievement goal theory through the inclusion of social goals in the research program of educational psychologists if it wants to become a truly global psychology.

Achievement Goal Theory

Achievement goal theory postulates that students' goals (particularly mastery and performance goals) exert a proximal influence on academic engagement and performance (Wolters 2004). Mastery and performance goals can predict various educational outcomes such as intrinsic motivation, reaction to success/failure, learning strategies, interest in the task, and GPA among others (see Hulleman et al. 2010 for a review).

Traditional achievement goal theory claims that students bring different kinds of goals into the classrooms: mastery goals and performance goals (Dweck and Leggett 1988). Students who pursue mastery goals in classrooms want to develop academic competence, while those who pursue performance goals want to demonstrate their competence

to others through social comparisons. Later, the trichotomous achievement goal theory, which divided performance goals into performance approach and performance avoidance goals, emerged. Students pursuing performance approach goals want to demonstrate high competence and gain positive judgments from others, while those who pursue performance avoidance goals focus on avoiding the demonstration of incompetence and preventing negative judgments from others. The 2×2 achievement goal framework is the most recent modification of the achievement goal theory where the approach-avoidance distinction is made for both mastery and performance goals, thus resulting in four different goal orientations: mastery approach, mastery avoidance, performance approach, and performance avoidance (Elliot and Murayama 2008,).

Despite the inclusion of more types of goals, achievement goal theory continues to give primary importance to individualistic goals. Both mastery and performance goals can be construed as individualistic goals because they both neglect the social reasons for striving to achieve in the academic domain and focus instead on personally-endorsed reasons. The almost-exclusive focus on mastery and performance goals is not only found in educational research but also in other sub-areas of psychology where achievement goal theory has been widely used to understand achievement motivation such as in industrial-organizational psychology (e.g. Baranik et al. 2007; VandeWalle 1997), sports psychology (e.g. Carr 2006; Harwood et al. 2008), and clinical psychology (e.g. Dykman 1998).

Social Goals

Cross-cultural researchers (e.g. Chang and Wong 2008; Chang et al. 2000; Singhal and Misra 1994; King et al. 2010; King and Watkins 2011a,b; Yu and Yang 1994; Watkins et al. 2002) have highlighted the importance of investigating social goals when doing research in collectivist settings. However, to date, most mainstream educational psychologists have not heeded their call for a more research into this neglected construct.

In this paper, social goals are defined as “perceived social purposes of trying to achieve academically” (Urdu and Maehr 1995, p.232). Aside from this definition, other approaches to social goals are also present in the literature. For example, Ryan and Shim (2006) focused on social achievement goals, which pertain to the orientations that people adopt towards the attainment of social competence (see also Horst et al. 2007). Wentzel (2000) looked at social goals from a content perspective and focused on what goals students try to pursue in the classroom. However, in this paper, we adopt an achievement goal theory approach to the study of social goals. Achievement goal theory focuses on the reasons/purposes for students’ academic engagement

and answers the question why students study. Using this paradigm, our definition of social goals likewise focus on the social reasons why students study. Achievement goal theory has proved to be a generative framework for examining achievement motivation in diverse settings, and we believe that framing social goals as an extension of the achievement goal framework would be a useful step in understanding motivational dynamics in school (Urdu and Maehr 1995).

There are a few research studies which have been conducted about social goals; however, there is a lack of unity in the field about the different types of social goals, the different instruments that can be used to measure these social goals, and the different correlates of these goals. For example, different researchers have suggested different possible goals that may be included under the rubric of social goals. Urdu and Maehr (1995) suggested the inclusion of social approval goals (the reason for studying is to gain the approval of teachers), social solidarity goals (the reason for studying is to bring honor to the family), and social welfare goals (the reason for studying is to become a productive member of society, etc.). McInerney et al. (2001) identified two types of social goals: social concern goals (concern for other students and a willingness to help them with their schoolwork) and affiliation goals (belonging to a group when doing schoolwork). Dowson and McInerney (2004), on the other hand, have proposed the inclusion of a greater range of goals such as social affiliation, social approval, social concern, social responsibility, and social status goals.

Theorizing on social goals has shown that these goals could differentially influence students’ cognitions, affect, and behavior in school (Dowson and McInerney 2001, 2003). They could provide motivational energy to the pursuit of task-related activities, and could potentially act in “conflicting, converging, or compensatory” ways to influence “academic motivation and performance” (Dowson and McInerney 2003, p. 91). Studies have shown that different types of social goals could potentially lead to different outcomes. For example, Bernardo (2008) showed that among Filipino students whereas seeking social approval from parents is related to mastery goals, seeking approval from teachers is not. In Greece, Leondari and Gonida (2007) found that the social goal of trying to please others can lead to self-handicapping behaviors. Watkins et al. (2002) found that social affiliation goals were not significant predictors of learning strategies; however, social status goals were positive predictors of deep learning, at least among Chinese students. In a study conducted in the Philippines, King and Watkins (2011a, b) showed that social affiliation was not significantly correlated to behavioral engagement, but social responsibility and social status goals were both shown to be strongly related to emotional and behavioral engagement. In terms of the relationship between self-beliefs and social goals, King, Ganotice, and Watkins (2011) found that both social affiliation and social concern goals were positively related to positive self-beliefs among Filipino secondary

students. In another study among Hong Kong students, King et al. (2011) found that whereas social affiliation and approval goals were not significantly correlated with educational outcomes, social concern and social status goals were shown to be the best predictors of quality learning. King et al. (2010) likewise showed that the effects of social goals held even after controlling for the variance accounted for by both mastery and performance goals.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that social goals are differentially related to various learning outcomes. They are important factors in determining students' motivational quality in school. As such, there is an urgent need to examine the social goal construct in attempting to understand students' motivation in school.

Problems with Existing Research on Social Goals

A few studies have begun to map out the nomological network associated with social goals. However, these studies have shown four major weaknesses: lack of breadth, lack of definitional precision and specification, lack of research on the relationship between academic and social goals, and lack of cross cultural studies. These weaknesses have limited the potential of social goals to be a powerful motivational construct that can enrich achievement goal theory.

Lack of Breadth

Although there have been some studies that investigated the role of social goals in academic motivation, they usually lacked breadth as they only focused on a few social goals. For example, Urdan (1994) only investigated social approval goals, while McInerney et al. (1997, 2001, 2003) only focused on two kinds of social goals (affiliation and concern). There have been some inductive qualitative studies that identified a broader range of social goals (e.g. Dowson and McInerney 2001, 2003), but thus far only a few quantitative studies (e.g. Watkins et al. 2002) have been undertaken that investigated the correlates and outcomes of these different types of social goals in a single study (see King and Watkins 2011b for an exception). As Covington (2000) argued, "Although we are relatively well informed about the role of academic goals in motivating achievement, our understanding of how social goals enter into the process lags behind" (p. 191), thus there is a need for more research on how the different kinds of social goals can influence academic motivation and engagement.

Lack of Definitional Precision and Specification

Social goal research is beset by a lack of definitional precision where social goals have been mixed with performance goals. For example, Meece and Holt (1993, p.582) had a construct

called ego-social goal, which they defined as "a desire to demonstrate high ability or to please the teacher." Meece et al. (1988) found that social approval goals and ego-oriented or performance goals were highly correlated and loaded on the same factor. Nicholls et al. (1985, p. 685) had an ego and social orientation scale where there were items like "I feel most successful if I work with friends," "I feel most successful if I show people I'm smart," and "I feel most successful if the teacher likes my work." Performance goal items, social approval items, and affiliation items seem to be mixed into one measure.

Even more recent measures of social goals, although clearly distinguishing between performance and social goals, fail to distinguish among the different types of social goals. For example, in McInerney et al.'s (1998) study, students were asked whether they felt pleased with themselves at school when they "try not to be better than their friends" and when they "like to help others with their schoolwork." The first item seems to be more of a striving to toward self-effacement, while the second is more of a social concern goal but both have been subsumed under an omnibus social goal construct. Within the domain of Chinese indigenous psychology, Yu and Yang (1994) argued for the inclusion of the socially-oriented achievement motivation (SOAM) construct, which can be construed as social goals. In their SOAM questionnaire, sample items include: "In order to get favorable impressions from the teacher, I always do the homework he/she assigns to the best of my abilities", "When I discover my classmates are more hardworking than me, I worry that I will lag behind", "I admire people with high status in society." The first item reflects striving for social approval goal; the second, resembles a performance avoidance goal; and the third seems to be more related to social status striving. These different kinds of social goals have all been lumped together into the broad term "social goals."

When different kinds of social goals are lumped together their effects on different educational outcomes may become unclear, thus Urdan and Maehr (1995, p. 232) argued that, "There is a critical need to untangle the many constructs represented by the term social goals."

Lack of Research on the Relationship between Academic and Social Goals

Another weakness in social goal research is the lack of studies that have investigated the relationships among mastery, performance, and social goals. Not much is known about how social goals can "complement, compensate, or conflict" with mastery and performance goals (Pintrich et al. 1993, p.181). Although some research has shown that pursuit of certain social goals can enhance academic motivation, the challenge is to identify precise ways in which social goals can influence academic motivation and accomplishments

(Wentzel and Wigfield 1998). There is an urgent need for research on identifying the relationships among mastery, performance, and social goals.

Lack of Cross-Cultural Studies

Although there has been some research on social goals in other cultures aside from the West (e.g. McInerney et al. 1998; Watkins et al. 2002), the majority of the research on social goals have still been conducted in Western settings (e.g. Urdan 1994; Miller et al. 1996; Wentzel 1999); thus not much is known about the differential effects of social goals in different cultures. Different social goals may have different effects for individuals in different cultures.

An important construct to consider in cross cultural research would be individualism and collectivism, because achievement may be defined in different ways in collectivist and individualist societies (e.g. Salili 1994).

There have been a few studies investigating the role of social goals in Western cultures, although their findings may not be wholly applicable to collectivist cultures. For example, American students perceived adult approval goals as similar to extrinsic goals (Urdan 1994). Some goal theorists have even included adult approval goals into their performance goal measures, since exploratory factor analysis found that they loaded onto one factor (e.g. Nicholls et al. 1985). This relationship between social approval goals and extrinsic motivation, however, may not hold in more collectivist cultures where there is less of a separation between one's self and one's in-group. Working for the sake of parental approval may actually represent a form of intrinsic motivation in these cultures (Iyengar and Lepper 1999). This issue highlights the need for researchers to study social goals in different cultural settings.

Directions for Future Research

In light of the weaknesses associated with the current research on social goals, some directions for future research are suggested. First would be to expand the repertoire of goals examined by educational psychologists. As Eccles et al. (1998, p.1032) claimed, "categorizing children's goals as ego (performance) or task involved (mastery) oversimplifies the complexity of motivation." Studies conducted by McInerney et al. (1998, 2003) have shown some promise in this direction by including constructs like social affiliation goals and social concern goals in investigating academic motivation. Second would be to investigate the nomological network of social goals across different cultures. Initial studies conducted by Watkins et al. (2002) have mapped the effects of different kinds of goals (mastery, performance and social) across different cultures. Additional research on the different kinds of

social goals could give educational psychologists a more complete picture of student motivation than that provided by focusing exclusively on mastery and performance goals.

Conclusion

Educational psychology's current preoccupation with mastery and performance goals to the relative neglect of social goals may be reflective of an implicit individualist stance, where priority is given to the goals and values of individuals, thus our current knowledge about social goals still lags far behind that of what is known about mastery and performance goals. As McInerney (2008, p. 369) wrote, "theories of learning and motivation house within them core values reflective of the societies and cultures in which the theories are developed." Educational psychologists need to be more aware of their cultural baggage as they pursue their research enterprises. This review claims that there is an urgent need for research on the social goals. Social goals can potentially enrich achievement goal theory and can make motivational research more sensitive to different cultural contexts.

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