

Conceptual and empirical dimensions of students' evaluation-related goals

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Trying to contribute to the current debate within achievement goal theory, concerning performance goals, we suggest is that there is more to students' goals related to evaluation than the concept of performance goals comprises.

Achievement goal theory divided the general achievement motive into two specific achievement goals: mastery goals and performance goals. Mastery goals refer to a focus on the development of competence, and performance goals refer to a focus on the demonstration of competence. In general, research has related mastery goals to positive, and performance goals to negative patterns of students' motivation and achievement. However, recent evidence has revealed mixed results of performance goals (e.g., for negative effects: Elliott & Dweck, 1988; e.g., for positive gains: Elliot, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998). The controversial effects of performance goals generated an intense debate within achievement goal theory (see, for example, Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). One line of work developed efforts to clarify the components of this type of goals. In this research direction, three main dimensions of performance goals have been identified: the approach-avoidance dimension, the social comparison or competitive dimension, and the social-validation or appearance dimension. The approach-avoidant dimension (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & Thrash, 2001) distinguishes performance-approach goals referring to the desire to outperform others, from performance-avoidant goals emphasizing avoiding performing significantly worse than others. Whereas some studies found distinct performance-approach and performance-avoidant goals, strong correlations have also been reported between the two goals (Ross et al., 2002; Midgley et al., 1998). Recent work (Elliot, 1999; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Urdan, 2000) has further distinguished between competition- and appearance-performance goals. Competitive goals refer to outperforming others or avoiding performing worse and appearance refers to concerns with self-presentation or validation

of one's competence (appearing able or avoiding appearing unable). However, there is still no consensual definition of performance goals.

Moreover, one line of research, including our own studies, questions the relevance of performance goals (Brophy, 2005; Dowson & McInnery, 2003; Lemos, 1996; Urdan, 2001). Using students' spontaneous definitions of their own goals we proposed (Lemos, 1996) three types of academic goals – learning goals, working goals, and evaluation goals. Evaluation-related goals comprise students' efforts to receive positive evaluations of academic work or to avoid negative ones. Although evaluation goals may include strong goal statements stressing competition and/or appearance concerns, they mainly consisted of weaker evaluation-related goal statements such as getting good grades or avoiding poor grades, being a good student or not failing in tests.

Study aims

Trying to contribute to the debate within achievement goal theory, concerning performance goal, the present study further explores the components of students' goals related with evaluation concerns. The main aims of this study were to establish (1) the distinctiveness and (2) the relevance of competitive and appearance concerns (performance goals) within students' overall evaluation-related goals as well as (3) to examine whether approach and avoidant goals are empirically distinct constructs.

Method

In order to achieve these aims a pool of items was developed to assess a variety of students' goals related with evaluation concerns, formed from the combination of three dimensions: approach-avoidance, appearance (present-absent), and competition (present-absent). From the eight resulting combinations, two (one approach and one avoidant) refer to goals with appearance and competitive purposes, two (one approach and one avoidant) refer to only appearance purposes, two (one approach and one avoidant) refer to only competitive purposes, and two (one approach and one avoidant) refer to evaluation goals (non-appearance and non-competitive evaluation purposes).

Participants were 120 students, from 3 fifth grade and 3 sixth grade classrooms from two city schools in the North of Portugal, who answered the evaluation-related goals items (on a 9 point Likert scale); two weeks later they also completed the personal goals scales of the PALS (Midgley, Maehr, Hruda, Anderman, Anderman, Freeman, Gheen, Kaplan, Kumar, Middleton, Nelson, Roeser, & Urdan, 2000).

Results and interpretation

Principal component analysis, suggested that the distinction between approach and avoidant performance goals seems unwarranted, confirming previous research. Rather, a separate dimension emerged, marked by competition. Goals emphasizing competitive purposes formed a separate dimension, suggesting that students distinguish between receiving positive evaluations or avoiding negative ones, and more “muscle” purposes of outperforming others. Results also suggest that in most cases appearance concerns might be an important component of evaluation-related goals.

The analysis of students’ goal priorities revealed very high levels of mastery and evaluation goals, followed by performance goals focused on appearance concerns, whereas competitive-performance goals were significantly less important.

In sum, the study shows that performance goals involving competition and/or appearance, only partially cover the conceptual and empirical field of students’ goals related to evaluation. Moreover, students’ goal priorities focus on learning, getting good grades and avoiding negative evaluations and, only to a smaller extent, on competition.