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Achievement Goals and Social Judgment: The Performance-Approach Goals Paradox

Benoit Dompnier*
Céline Darnon**
Florian Delmas***
Fabrizio Butera****

Abstract
Although performance-approach goals are considered as “bad” goals by many researchers and teachers, succeeding at the university requires achieving more than one’s counterparts by pursuing performance-approach goals. The present research examines the perceived social value of performance-approach goals at the university. Students were asked to judge a target who strongly/weakly endorsed performance-approach goals from their own perspective and that of their teachers. The results indicated that targets who strongly endorsed performance-approach goals are seen as desirable.
Many teachers likely become frustrated when, despite their best efforts to focus students on course content and divert their attention from competitive issues, many students seem to be overly concerned with their grades – more exactly, their grades compared to those of other students. The focus on outperforming others is qualified by many researchers as “performance goals” (Dweck, 1986). During the last decade, these goals have been the center of an animated debate (see Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Kaplan & Middleton, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). On the one hand, teachers may want to avoid performance goals as much as possible in their classes (e.g., Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986); however, a great deal of research suggest that these goals are significant predictors of positive outcomes, including academic achievement (for reviews, see Baron & Harackiewicz, 2000; Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Tyson, & Patall, 2008).

Researchers’ debate about performance goals could reflect a more general ambivalence toward these goals in the educational system, especially at the university. In a recent paper, Darron, Dompiernier, Delmas, Pulfrey, and Butera (in press) examined and documented the ambivalence related to the perceived social value of achievement goals at the university. The aim of the present paper is to extend this research and unveil the dynamics of the performance-approach goals paradox.

Performance-Approach Goals and Social Judgment

Approach goals were perceived as lower in social desirability than those who weakly endorsed them, especially when participants answered from their own point of view. However, the former were perceived higher in terms of social utility than the latter, especially when participants answered according to their teachers’ points of view. Results are discussed in term of explicit and implicit goals promotion at the university.
**Performance-Approach Goals as “Bad” Goals**

The work initiated by Dweck (1986) and Nicholls (1984) has produced a great deal of research designed to understand why, in academic situations, students seem to have different reactions. According to previous research, these different reactions can be explained by the fact that students endorse various achievement goals. Both Dweck and Nicholls initially suggested the existence of two types of goals: Mastery goals refer to the desire to learn and improve one’s own level of competence; whereas performance goals refer to the desire to perform well compared to others.

Early theory on achievement goals (Dweck, 1986) concluded that, compared to mastery goals, performance goals were maladaptive (see also Ames, 1992). Indeed, the research carried out in this area has largely demonstrated the potential negative outcomes resulting from the endorsement of performance goals. For example, performance goals have been shown to induce less effort (Ames & Archer, 1988; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984), attribution of failure to a lack of abilities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), choice of easy rather than challenging tasks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984), a superficial mode of studying (Nolen, 1988), cheating (for a review, see Anderman & Danner, 2008) and unwillingness to cooperate with others (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999, especially different others, cf. Tossman, Kaplan, & Assor, 2008).

In the 1990s, however, some researchers started to question this idea and demonstrated that things may not be so simple. Notably, Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) showed that, in their “approach” form, performance goals do not always result in negative outcomes. These authors suggest differentiating performance-avoidance goals (aiming not to perform poorly, as compared to others) from performance-approach goals (aiming to outperform others) (Elliot, 1997, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997). Some research has supported that performance-approach goals were not as maladaptive as performance-avoidance goals (e.g., Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Elliot & Church, 1997). More importantly, when taking into account the approach/avoidance distinction, a great deal of research has shown that a positive link appears between performance-approach goals and some positive outcomes, especially academic success (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2003; Bouffard,
Boisvert, Vezeau, & Larouche, 1995; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Pintrich, 2000; Skaalvik, 1997; see also Bodmann, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2008).

Interestingly, despite the numerous studies supporting the existence of this positive link, this work has encountered much resistance (see Brophy, 2005; Midgley et al., 2001). This can be understood from the fact that social sciences universities are steeped in a left-wing ideology (Guimond, Begin, & Palmer, 1989; Guimond & Palmer, 1990). In such a context, performance-approach goals – that is, the goal to outperform others or “beat the competition” – cannot be perceived as positive (competition implies the acceptance of inequality between individuals, which corresponds to some core aspects of the classical right-wing ideology; see Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007).

Moreover, other research has demonstrated that performance goals result from a fixed view of intelligence (Dweck, 1999). Such a conception of intelligence, as a disposition that cannot change, would challenge teachers’ official role: to enable students to progress and learn. This could explain why teachers prefer to adhere to an incremental view of intelligence (Ping, Solmon, & McBride, 2006) and judge high mastery-oriented students more positively than low mastery-oriented students (Schraw & Aplin, 1998).

Yet this is not the case in performance goals. Such observations led Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) to qualify performance goals as “politically incorrect goals” (p. 169). The unpopularity of performance-approach goals was confirmed in a pilot study conducted by Darnon et al. (in press) on French psychology teachers. This study clearly demonstrated that psychology teachers significantly encourage their students to endorse mastery goals and do not try to promote performance-approach goals at all in their classes.

**Performance-Approach Goals as “Good” Goals**

If such a consensus exists in regard to the need to avoid performance-approach goals in the classroom, why do teachers report having such difficulties in reducing performance goal issues in their classrooms (Urdan, 1997; Urdan & Turner, 2005)? Moreover,
in a context in which endorsing performance-approach goals is
devalued, how is it possible that performance-approach goals
appear to be such a strong and robust predictor of academic
performance? In order to answer these questions, it is important
to consider the university as a system.
As mentioned by some authors as an explanation of the link
between performance-approach goals and grades, university
grading is based on social comparison and normative curves (e.g.
Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998). In such a system, students
are recognized as competent when they get better grades than
their peers. Indeed, the university system, even when officially
committed to criterion-based evaluation, applies a norm-based
selection strategy. For example, in the 2006-2007 academic year,
among the 720 students enrolled in the first year of psychology at
a large French university, less than 50 percent were allowed to
continue into the second year of study. In the same university,
only 208 students (around 30 percent of the original sample)
received their “Licence” degree (third year), and fewer than 40
students got a fifth-year master’s degree (between 5 and 6
percent of the original sample). This proportion appears to be
quite stable when compared with previous years, indicating that
success at the university may depend more on university func-
tioning constraints (e.g., the tacit requirement for universities not
to distribute a degree to more than a certain number of students
per year) than on students’ actual levels of achievement. In other
words, students are selected based on their ranks rather than
their absolute performance.
This fact implies that the university does not aim exclusively to
teach students skills and knowledge; it also has a selection func-
tion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Bourdieu, Passeron, & Nice,
1990; Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996; Duru-Bellat, 1996). In
such a system, trying to outperform others is not maladaptive.
Indeed, if one has to be on the right side of the achievement
curve to get a degree, performance-approach goals might actu-
ally very well match the demands of the situation. Consistent with
this analysis, research has indicated that a grading structure
based on normative comparison enhances performance goals
(Butler, 1987, 2006; Butler & Nisan, 1986).

Thus, what should students really think about endorsing performance-approach goals? Although such goals are generally devalued in researchers’ and teachers’ explicit discourse, even if variations exist across teachers (cf. Butler, 2007), success at the university requires getting better grades than others, meaning that performance-approach goals match the university’s structure and functioning. If this reasoning is true, then performance-approach goals should lead to particularly ambivalent feelings. Notably, such a paradoxical view of performance-approach goals implies that a student who does not endorse these goals should appear to be “nice”; however, this same student should not be perceived as having a great chance to succeed at the university. This distinction between a judgment of sympathy (being “nice”) and a judgment of competence (succeeding at the university) is certainly not trivial and echoes existing research on social judgment.

**Two Dimensions of Social Judgment**

As noted by Daronon et al. (in press), numerous studies in social psychology indicate that people’s perceptions of persons and groups seem to be organized along two fundamental dimensions (for recent reviews, see Cambon, 2006; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). The first dimension relates to what makes persons and groups positive or negative, likeable or unlikeable, and socially and morally attractive or unattractive; it includes traits such as “nice,” “likeable,” “aggressive,” and “selfish.” Many authors refer to this dimension as “warmth” (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), “other-profitability” (Peeters, 1992) or “social desirability” (Beauvois, 1995, 2003; Dubois & Beauvois, 2001, 2005; Rosenberg, Nelson & Vivekananthan, 1968; see Judd et al., 2005, for the many other terms used in the literature). The second dimension relates to what makes persons and groups active or passive, powerful or impotent, and successful or unsuccessful; it generally includes traits such as “competent,” “smart,” and “idiotic” and has been defined by several authors as “competence” (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999), “self-profitability” (Peeters, 1992) or “social utility” (Beauvois, 1995, 2003; Dubois & Beauvois, 2001, 2005).
Although various theoretical approaches have been proposed to explain the origin of such a bidimensional organization of the person or group attributes (see Fiske et al., 2002; Peeters, 1992), Beauvois and Dubois’s seems particularly relevant to the problem of the social value of goals at the university (Beauvois, 1995, 2003; Dubois & Beauvois, 2001, 2005). According to these authors, social value can be divided into two components: social desirability and social utility. Social desirability refers to the individuals’ aptitude to satisfy the motivations of the members of a given social group and the aptitude to be liked. Social utility refers to the individuals’ aptitude to satisfy the requirement of a given social environment or the aptitude to be perceived as successful by the evaluators.

This distinction between social desirability and social utility has allowed Darnon et al. (in press) to address the performance-approach goals paradox at the university. Although performance-approach goals contradict the dominant ideology and teachers should perceive performance-approach goals’ endorsement as socially undesirable, in line with the selection function of the university, students have to outperform one another in order to succeed at the university; consequently, performance-approach goals should be perceived by teachers as high in social utility. Darnon et al. (in press) tested these various hypotheses in two experiments in which psychology students were asked to put themselves in the shoes of psychology teachers and judge a fictitious student who was high or low on achievement goals endorsement. Results of the social value of performance-approach goals revealed the expected pattern of results: Although performance-approach goals were perceived as undesirable, they were perceived as useful.

**Overview and Hypotheses**

The present research aims to extend Darnon et al.’s (in press) work as far as the performance-approach goals paradox is concerned. First, this study will replicate their results to demonstrate that the endorsement of performance-approach goals should be valued differently in terms of social desirability and social utility. As performance-approach goals correspond to a competitive view of relationships with other students, a student
with a high level of performance-approach goals should be perceived as less socially desirable than a student who endorses such goals to a lesser extent. Meanwhile, as the endorsement of performance-approach goals fits the selective function of the university, students with a high performance-approach goals’ endorsement should be perceived as higher in terms of social utility than students with a low level of performance-approach goals.

However, even if such reasoning seems relevant for describing the social value of performance-approach goals, it is still based on the assumption that social desirability and social utility correspond to distinct functions in the organization (to be liked versus to be judged as successful) and that students are capable to perceive these in a sort of normative clearsightedness (Somat & Vazel, 1999). Thus, the second aim of this study is to test this assumption experimentally by showing that, when they respond in the name of their teachers, students do not respond in the same way as when they respond from their own perspective. Indeed, according to the position they adopt in the organization (their own position as students versus their teachers’ position), it is expected that participants should be able to judge the targets differently on social desirability and social utility. More precisely, as far as the social desirability dimension is concerned, students are directly concerned by the target’s goals (the target wants to outperform them). It is therefore expected that the difference between a target who strongly endorses performance-approach goals and a target who weakly endorses these goals in terms of social desirability will be stronger when students judge the target from their own points of view (as students) than when they judge the target from their teachers’ points of view. Conversely, because teachers are the most relevant social agents of the university system and are responsible for the selection process, they should be highly concerned about the social utility of performance-approach goals. Thus, it is expected that the difference between a target who strongly endorses performance-approach goals and a target who weakly endorses these goals in terms of social utility will be stronger when students judge the target from their teachers’ point of view than when they judge the target from their own.
Method

Participants

Eighty-six junior (third-year) psychology students from the University of Grenoble (France) participated in this study. The participants’ mean age was 22.58. They were randomly assigned to one of the two between-participants experimental conditions (N = 43 in each condition). The sample consisted of 74 females and 10 males (two participants did not report their sex).

Materials and Procedure

The procedure was based on the “judge paradigm” (Dubois, 2000; Gilibert & Cambon, 2003; see Jellison & Green, 1981, for the use of the same kind of procedure). The materials used for the experiment included two kinds of documentation. The first, presented as a questionnaire previously filled in by another psychology student, contained three items – namely, the performance-approach goals items extracted from the French version of Elliot and McGregor’s 2001 scale (Darnon & Butera, 2005; e.g., “It is important for me to do better than other students”). The fictitious participant was supposed to have answered to what extent each of these items was true for him (her) on a 7-point scale (from 1 “not at all” to 7 “very much”). Depending on the condition, the target’s answers were either high (6, 5, and 6 were circled) or low (2, 3, and 2 were circled) on these items.

The second document was a questionnaire on which participants had to describe the fictitious student according to various traits. Eight traits were presented: “Likely to succeed at the university” (ayant de fortes chances de réussir ses études); “Pleasant” (agréable); “Likeable” (aimable); “Appreciable” (appreciable); “Nice” (sympathique); “Competent” (compétent); “Gifted” (doué); and “Smart” (intelligent). Participants were asked to answer on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) for each of these traits. Furthermore, participants had to describe the fictitious participant twice. In one within-participants condition, they were asked to respond on their own behalf and to indicate on the various scales what they thought about the target student. In the other, they were asked to respond by putting themselves in the shoes of another person and indicating on the
scales what they imagined psychology teachers would think about the target student. The presentation order of these two conditions was counterbalanced across participants.

Results

Factor Analyses

Two factor analyses (principal axis factoring with Kaiser normalization and oblimin rotation) were conducted on the participants’ responses. The first analysis was conducted on participants' ratings in the “own perception” answers while the second analysis was conducted on participants’ ratings in the “teachers’ perception” answers. As evident in Table 1, participants’ ratings in both within-participants conditions were organized along two factors; the first corresponded to the social desirability dimension, and the second to the social utility dimension. In both analyses, these two factors correlated weakly (own perception condition: \( r = .21 \); “teachers’ perception” condition: \( r = .10 \)) and had a good internal consistency (all \( \alpha s > .76 \)). Participants’ factor scores were extracted from each factor analysis and used as dependent variables in the subsequent analyses. In the “own perception” condition, participants’ scores ranged from -2.37 to 2.20 on social desirability and from -3.01 to 1.95 on social utility. In the “teachers’ perception” condition, participants’ scores ranged from -2.85 to 2.11 on social desirability and from -2.18 to 2.13 on social utility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Own perception</th>
<th>“Teachers’ perception”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social desirability</td>
<td>Social utility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeable</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciable</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely to succeed</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained variance</td>
<td>46.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach alphas</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cronbach alphas were computed only on the four traits in bold within each column.
Overview of the Analyses

A 2 (Target’s level of performance-approach goals endorsement: low, high) × 2 (participant’s adopted point of view: own point of view, “teachers’” point of view) analysis of variance was performed on social desirability and social utility. The second variable served as a within-participants variable. Since in preliminary analyses, no effects of age or sex were identified, these two variables were not examined further.

Social Desirability

The analysis of variance revealed a main effect for target’s level of performance-approach goals endorsement on perceptions of social desirability. The target with a low level of performance-approach goals (\(M = .42, SD = .97\)) was perceived as higher in social desirability than the target with a high level of performance-approach goals (\(M = -.42, SD = .56\)), \(F(1, 84) = 24.31, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .22\). In addition, the predicted interaction between the target’s level of goals endorsement and the adopted point of view was significant, \(F(1, 84) = 10.04, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11\). This interaction is presented in Figure 1. Simple effects indicated that the difference between low and high goals endorsement was significant in the own perception condition (low goals endorsement: \(M = .54, SD = 1.01\); high goals endorsement: \(M = -.56, SD = .59\), \(F(1, 84) = 38.03, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .31\), as well as in the “teachers’” perception condition (low goals endorsement, \(M = .30, SD = 1.08\); high goals endorsement: \(M = -.28, SD = .73\), \(F(1, 84) = 8.38, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09\). The interaction however indicated that this difference was greater in the former condition than in the latter. The main effect of the adopted point of view was not significant, \(F(1, 84) < 1\).

Social Utility

As far as the social utility dimension is concerned, the analysis of variance revealed a main effect of the target’s level of performance-approach goals endorsement. The target with a low level of performance-approach goals was perceived as lower in social utility (\(M = -.18, SD = .76\)) than the target with a high level of performance-approach goals (\(M = .17, SD = .70\)), \(F(1, 84) = 4.68,\)
The predicted interaction between the target’s level of performance-approach goals endorsement and the adopted point of view was also significant, $F(1, 84) = 4.31, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$. This interaction is presented in Figure 2. Simple effects indicated that the difference between low and high goals endorsement was significant in the “teachers’” perception condition (low goals endorsement: $M = -.29, SD = .99$; high goals endorsement: $M = .28, SD = .80$), $F(1, 84) = 8.55, p < .05, \eta^2 = .09$, but not in the own perception condition (low goals endorsement: $M = -.06, SD = .91$; high goals endorsement: $M = .06, SD = .85$), $F(1, 84) < 1$, ns. The main effect of the adopted point of view was not significant, $F(1, 84) < 1$.

Discussion

As discussed earlier, during the last decade, performance-approach goals were the object of a great debate. Although these goals were clearly identified as “bad goals” by many researchers and teachers (e.g., Brophy, 2005), they match the university
grading structure; indeed, many studies have shown that they predict academic performance (for a review, see Harackiewicz et al., 2002, or Barron & Harackiewicz, 2000). This led to the idea that students might develop ambivalent feelings toward such goals. The results of the present experiment clearly support the existence of such ambivalence among students. Compared to a target who weakly endorsed performance-approach goals, a target who strongly endorsed such goals was perceived as low in social desirability, thereby confirming the negative representation people explicitly have of performance-approach goals at the university, which replicates Darnon et al.’s results (in press). The specific contribution of the present results lies in the fact that this negative representation appears especially when students answer from their own points of view, indicating that students perfectly master the normative meaning of performance-approach goals endorsement.

This latter result can be understood by the fact that pursuing performance-approach goals means trying to be better than other students. Therefore, when students evaluate the target from their own point of view, they might perceive a fellow

![Figure 2: Social utility of performance-approach (perf.-app.) goals as a function of judge's position.](image-url)
student who highly endorses performance-approach goals as a “bad person” not only because this student does not comply with the dominant ideology, but also because he or she is a competitor who explicitly recognizes that he or she wants to outperform the participant. Such a claim can be negatively perceived by participants. Indeed, the assertion that one wants to be better than others could be perceived as a direct provocation since it could make participants think this person is a braggart. Research conducted on self-presentation strategy has already shown that a boastful person was less liked than a modest one (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996). This analysis suggests that performance-approach goals could be undesirable for different reasons that are anchored at different levels of analysis (Doise, 1986). At a societal level, performance-approach goals do not match the university ideology of competition avoidance. At an interpersonal level, they induce competition among students and could produce deleterious social relationships.

Thus, students think that to appear as nice persons – especially in their peers’ eyes – they should not endorse performance-approach goals. However, the results on social utility point out that the matter is not as simple as it might initially appear. Indeed, the target who strongly endorsed performance-approach goals was perceived as higher in social utility than the target who weakly endorsed these goals, again reproducing Darnon et al.’s results. The interaction specifies, however, that this is the case only when students answer while adopting their teachers’ point of view. This result supports the claim that performance-approach goals are valued in terms of social utility because of their fit with the university’s actual functioning. Indeed, the social utility of these goals is essentially recognized when adopting the point of view of those who are the most direct selection agents of the university system. When acting as “teachers,” students become particularly sensitive to the social constraints of the organization to which they belong and attribute more social utility to persons who satisfy the requirements of the university system than when they act as students.

In addition, these results help to better understand the processes that underlie participants’ judgments and to rule out a possible alternative explanation to the results of Darnon et al. (in press).
One could argue that since no information was provided about the target’s academic competence, participants could have inferred it from the level of performance-approach goals’ endorsement: the higher the target’s goal endorsement, the higher the target’s academic level. Thus, results could be due to inferred competence about the target rather than to the target’s performance goals’ endorsement. The present study challenges this alternative explanation; indeed, such an explanation would imply that the effect would occur regardless of the judge’s position. In the present study, however, the target’s level of performance goals affected judgment in the “teachers’” condition only and not in the “own perception” condition. This supports the idea that results were not due to an inference about the target’s level of academic competence. Nevertheless, future research should more directly test this hypothesis by giving the participants information about the target’s level of academic performance in addition to their responses to an achievement goals scale.

To summarize, the results obtained in the present experiment indicate that students seem to be perfectly aware of the fact that, in spite of the explicit discourse and recommendations, teachers might perceive a target who strongly endorses performance-approach goals as someone who has a great chance of succeeding at the university. This contradiction between the ideological discourse and the social utility attached to performance-approach goals clearly documents the ambivalence toward performance-approach goals. It could also shed light on the initial interrogation about the persistence of student’s endorsement of performance-approach goals despite teachers’ efforts to prevent them to pursue such goals. Students actually learn from their everyday experiences, in which competition and social comparison are key elements of the university’s evaluative practices. Therefore, it makes sense that, independent of the teachers’ explicit recommendations, students want to compare their own abilities with those of others and attempt to outperform them.

It is important to note that this research suffers from one important limitation. Students’ perceptions of teachers’ points of view might not be an exact reflection of what teachers really think. This manipulation was important as it served the purpose of
showing that students understand university norms by asking them to adopt the points of view of different university agents (namely, students and teachers). However, it is possible that students overattribute a selection goal to their teachers. Thus, in addition to asking students to answer from their teachers’ point of view, it would have been interesting to have the teachers’ actual perception of social desirability and social utility of achievement goals. Future research should examine this point.

In spite of this limitation and the need for future research, the present results contribute to achievement goal theory on three points. First, as mentioned in the introduction, research conducted within the achievement goal framework is abundant. Surprisingly, however, no research has thus far investigated the consequences of achievement goals’ endorsement on social judgment. The research presented in this article contributes to opening a new and complementary approach to achievement goals theory by looking at the effects of goals on social judgment. Taking such interpersonal consequences into account could help to complete the initial theory in placing achievement goal endorsement into a more social context (see also Darnon, Muller, Schrager, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2006; Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007; Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, & Van de Vliert, 2007, see also Tossman et al., 2008).

Moreover, the present research could help explain the results obtained in the area of achievement goals. It is interesting to note, for example, that the present experiment suggests that the performance-approach goals measures can be biased by social desirability concerns. In most research, the mean reported level of self-set performance-approach goals is fairly low (between 2 and 4 on a 7-point scale). Moreover, as Brophy noted in 2005, students rarely report endorsing performance goals spontaneously. However, this does not necessarily mean that students do not endorse these goals. Rather, such reported levels can depend on students’ clear perception that performance-approach goals are socially undesirable – that is, eliciting a judgment as “bad” persons from their peers and teachers.

Finally, in line with the research on goals structure (e.g., Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Urdan, 2004), the present results suggest that understanding performance-approach goals in the classroom requires considering not only what teachers might
think or say, but also the contextual cues that might enhance perceived utility of performance-approach goals. The data herein indicate that students can detect not only what they are told to do (not to endorse performance goals), but also what is implicitly demanded by the competitive base of academic success. As discussed in the introduction, the link between performance-approach goals and academic achievement is very well documented (see Harackiewicz et al., 2002, for a review). One possible explanation of such a link could be that performance-approach goals actually match the academic demand. This could explain why, in such a context, performance-approach goals are adaptive. These analyses would be congruent with the “matching hypothesis” developed by several authors (Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1998; Durik & Harackiewicz, 2003). According to these authors, much interest is observed when the target and the purpose goals are congruent. Perhaps the same kind of mechanism occurs for performance.

This point raises the question of the context as a moderator of performance-approach goals effects. Indeed, the present results lead to questions about whether performance-approach goals would be considered useful in systems in which competence is not defined in terms of normative comparison. It also questions whether, in contrast, they would be considered undesirable in systems where competence is clearly and officially defined in terms of normative comparison. Such a question could represent an interesting avenue for future research. It also points out the need to examine achievement goals theory within a more societal approach to address the relationship between the individual psychological functioning and the social structure of the environment (Doise, 2004).

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