TOWARD A CLARIFICATION OF THE EFFECTS OF ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

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Achievement goals are a phenomenal driving force in all domains of human activities in which competence is concerned, be it at school, at work or in sports. They influence a person’s approach to a task, as well as his or her involvement, information processing and behavior, and it is therefore of the utmost importance to understand their effects. The literature on achievement goals, however, yields conflicting results on these effects and conflicting recommendations to practitioners. Thus, the present special issue is intended to contribute to a reconciliation of different theoretical perspectives on achievement goals and to provide some clarifications of their effects.

The study of motivation in the context of school and university has been the focus of considerable work, and in the last 30 years a substantial number of studies have used the achievement goal approach as a frame of reference (Dweck, 1992; Elliot, 2005; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Nicholls, 1984). Achievement situations are defined as situations in which competence is at stake (Nicholls, 1984; Pérez & Mugny, 1996). But how can one’s competence be established? One way is to make progress and improve one’s mastery of a task. Another way is to try to outperform others. According to many authors, the choice...
between these options depends on the goals that individuals pursue in a specific task. In work on achievement goals, two main types of goals are defined: mastery goals and performance goals (for reviews see Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 2005; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Mastery goals – also called learning goals (Dweck, 1986, 1992), or task-involvement goals (Nicholls, 1984) – correspond to the desire to learn, that is, to the desire to improve one’s knowledge and task-mastery. Competence is therefore defined in terms of personal progress. In contrast, performance goals – also called ego-involvement goal (Nicholls, 1984) or relative competence goals (Urdan, 1997) – correspond to the desire to promote a positive evaluation as compared to others. In this case competence evaluation depends on social comparison.

In more recent models of achievement goals, a distinction is made between the approach and avoidance forms of achievement goals (Elliot, 1997; 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). In this model, performance-approach goals (the desire to outperform others) are distinguished from performance-avoidance goals (the desire not to be outperformed by others). Moreover, although there is less consensus on the relevance of such distinction, some authors make the same distinction for mastery goals (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen, 2006): Mastery-approach goals correspond to the desire to increase one’s own level of competence and task mastery (i.e., to perform better than in the past) whereas mastery-avoidance goals correspond to the desire not to “lose” one’s own level of task mastery (i.e., not to perform more poorly than in the past).

“Positive” and “negative” effects of mastery and performance goals

For years, achievement goals authors have considered that mastery goals engendered a pattern of positive, adaptive responses (choice of difficult tasks, persistence following failure, effort; see for example Ames & Archer, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Performance goals, on the other hand, were considered as more likely to induce less adaptive behaviors (Dweck, 1986): effort avoidance, choice of easier tasks that guarantee a positive evaluation, lower level of task appreciation, vulnerability to
failure (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Moreover, it has been shown that mastery goals encourage the use of adaptive learning strategies, such as organization, attentive listening and self-regulation (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Bouffard, Boisvet, Vezeau, & Larouche, 1995). Several studies have also revealed that mastery goals favor deep learning whereas performance goals are associated with surface learning strategies (e.g., Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Nolen, 1988). Some other studies have also indicated that mastery goals predicted task interest, a finding not found for performance goals (for reviews see Barron & Harackiewicz, 2000; Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999). It is probably because of the link between mastery goals and such forms of “adaptive behaviour” (e.g., persistence after failure, adaptive learning strategies, interest) that, throughout the history of research in this field, many authors have argued that mastery goals should also favor performance, whereas performance goals should, on the contrary, diminish it (see for example Brophy, 2005; Dweck, 1986, 1992; Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Nicholls, 1984).

However this initial view of achievement goals has been strongly challenged by recent findings in the literature. Indeed, recent research suggests that the links between mastery and performance goals and academic outcomes is more complex. In particular, some researchers report a positive relationship between mastery goals and academic performance (Covington & Omelich, 1984; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Licht & Dweck, 1984). A good number of studies, however, do not show this positive link (e.g. Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997, Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Pintrich, 2000; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005; Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996). Moreover, most of the above studies did not show the expected negative links between performance goals and academic performance. Even more surprisingly, in many of them, a positive link was observed between performance-approach goals and academic performance. This positive link has been observed in college classrooms (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 1997) as well as in smaller more mastery-oriented classrooms (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2003) and on performance on laboratory tasks in experimental studies (e.g., Barron & Harackiewicz,
2001; Darnon, Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade, 2007; Elliot, Shell, Bouas Henri, & Maier, 2005); in the short term as well as in the long term (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 2000). This positive link thus appears to be very consistent (for a review, see Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002).

Thus, although it was first considered as fairly straightforward, the question of achievement goals effects soon became more complex than initially thought. Indeed, mastery goals endorsement results in many of the predicted positive outcomes (e.g., interest, deep studying), but usually it does not typically predict academic achievement. Performance goals, on the other hand, often do.

The current debate about the effects of mastery and performance goals

The challenge that recent data represented for early theorizing on achievement goals gave rise to an important debate about the adaptive nature of mastery and performance goals (see for example Brophy, 2005; Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Kaplan & Middleton, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan & Middleton, 2001). To summarize the debate, two main directions are currently adopted. On the one hand, some authors suggest a revision of achievement goal theory (Harackiewicz et al., 1998, 2002). In this revision, it is argued that the original conclusions about the effects of achievement goals might be premature. In support of this idea, three main points have been developed. First, the distinction between performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals allows clarification of the conditions for performance goal effects. Indeed, performance-avoidance goals are related to a high level of anxiety (Elliot & McGregor, 1999) and engender a pattern of maladaptive behavior, notably in terms of intrinsic motivation and performance (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot et al., 1999; Elliot & McGregor, 1999, 2001; McGregor & Elliot, 2002; Skaalvik, 1997). This is however not necessarily the case of performance-approach goals. And the potential for performance-approach goals to enhance positive outcomes is precisely the second argument supporting a revision. Indeed, in many studies, performance-approach goals predict positive
outcomes including academic performance (cf. supra, or Harackiewicz et al., 1998, 2002, for reviews). The final argument stands on the fact that there is evidence suggesting that the optimal motivational pattern is to pursue both mastery and performance goals (i.e., a multiple goal perspective, Barron & Harackiewicz, 2000, 2001).

On the other hand, some authors argue that such a revision is not relevant (Midgley et al., 2001; Kaplan & Middleton, 2002). In particular, these authors disagree with the idea that performance-approach goals can be adaptive. As an example, Midgley et al. (2001) argue that although the distinction between performance-approach and performance-avoidance helped clarify important issues, one should not conclude from such a distinction that performance-approach goals lead to positive outcomes or that they are universally adaptive. In particular, they might be adaptive only for some students (e.g., those high in perceived ability) or when associated with high mastery goals. Finally, these authors underline that given that performance-approach goals represent a high cost, like for example, the cost of enhancing maladaptive behaviors (e.g., self-handicapping, avoidance of help-seeking, vulnerability to failure), they should definitely not be promoted in classes. In the same vein, Brophy (2005) presented several arguments against the revision of achievement goals theory strongly arguing that performance-approach goals lead to negative outcomes. This author even refers to “the danger of drawing counter-productive implications for teachers from goal theory research” (pp. 175). Thus, the main arguments on which authors disagree seems to be the extent to which performance-approach goals lead to “positive” or “negative” outcomes.

The present issue

We think that viewing achievement goals within such a perspective can be restrictive. Indeed, reducing the study of performance and mastery goals to predicting “positive” vs. “negative” outcomes does not allow to understand the mechanism underlying these goals’ effects, nor do they allow us to understand why mastery goals and performance goals predict various outcomes. In the present issue, we try to understand goals effects by
focusing on the nature of the outcomes predicted by different goals, rather than on their valence ("positive" or "negative" outcomes).

This is done in five steps. First, Linnenbrink-Garcia, Tyson and Patall (2008) review and summarize the goals effects on performance described in the literature of the last 30 years. In this review, over 90 peer-reviewed journal articles will be examined. This review suggests very mixed results. In particular, about half of the reviewed studies reported a positive link between mastery goals and performance, and approximately the same percentage reported a positive effect for performance-approach goals and performance, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions about goal effects on performance. Furthermore, the authors review various moderators that could account for such inconsistency (e.g., task characteristics, perceived competence, multiple goals). This review emphasizes the fact that results are highly inconsistent both for mastery and performance-approach goals. It also highlights the need for more research examining the moderators and mediators of goal effects.

In line with this idea, in the second part of this issue, authors examine some possible mediators and moderators of goal effects on performance. In their article, Bodmann, Hulleman and Harackiewicz (2008) demonstrate that mastery and performance-approach goals differ in the number of associated goal-means. Following goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), the authors show that performance goals lead to a more differentiated judgment of importance of academic behaviors than mastery goals and that the positive link between performance goals and grade is partially mediated by the greater differentiation of academic behaviors (lower number of associated “goal-means”). Moreover, the article by Renkema and VanYperen (2008) examines a specific moderator of achievement goals effects: regulatory focus. More specifically, this article examines the potential for goals of the fit with a specific regulatory focus (i.e., prevention vs. promotion). Their results partially support the “fit” hypothesis, showing that a prevention strategy results in better performance for performance-avoidance goals participants but not performance-approach goals participants.

It is argued that to fully understand goal effects, it is important to study how they affect various outcomes and not only those exam-
ined most frequently in this literature (i.e., intrinsic motivation and academic performance). Thus, in the third part of the special issue, we examine the effects of goals on other outcomes. Conroy, Cassidi and Elliot (2008) report data concerning the link between the four achievement goals (mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach and performance-avoidance) and the quality of the training for athletes. Their results suggest that mastery-approach goals, more than performance goals (either performance-approach or performance-avoidance), lead to beneficial training processes (e.g., low alcohol use, low distress, use of mental training strategies). Then, Niiya and Crocker (2008) test whether goals affect self-esteem. More particularly, they demonstrate that the link between mastery goals and self-esteem protection is not as straightforward as one might think. Indeed, mastery goals do not always reduce vulnerability to academic failure for highly academic contingent students. In particular, when positively linked to ability-validation goals (a type of performance goals), these goals predict higher vulnerability to grades. Still in the third part, Anderman and Danner (2008) review the main results obtained in the literature concerning the link between goals and a particular outcome: cheating. Their review indicates that in most research, mastery goals are related to less cheating. In contrast, performance goals positively predict academic cheating. Finally, Tossman, Kaplan and Assor (2008) examine the preference for cooperation with ingroup members. In their research, these authors study the link between perceived classroom goal structures and students’ bias towards cooperating with peers who are similar to them. Their results indicate that a perceived emphasis on performance goals predicts participants’ preference for similar partners even when controlling for personal goals. Mastery goals, on the other hand, negatively predict this biased preference.

In a fourth step, a descriptive approach of goals has been followed. In two studies, Sideridis and Mouratidis (2008) show that other goals than achievement goals might be at stake in the classrooms and that the presence of these goals might create a complex system. This research will also question the measurement of goals showing that goal scales and open-ended questions do not necessarily assess the same process.

In a fifth and final step, a different approach to achievement goals will be proposed. More specifically, Dompnier, Darnon, Delmas
and Butera (2008) examine the social value attributed to performance-approach goals, the more “controversial” goal discussed in literature (cf. above). These authors point to an important ambivalence in the promotion of these goals, reflecting the ambivalence mentioned above: Indeed, these goals combine the particularity both to mismatch the teachers’ discourse and values (condemning competition), and to match the very functioning of grading and of academic success (as mentioned above, performance-approach goals predict academic performance).

The question of clarifying the impact of achievement goals is essential both from a theoretical and practical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, the articles in the present issue contribute to understanding goal effects by focusing on the nature of the outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, quality of sport training) and on the processes (e.g., identifying mediators and moderators of goal effects on performance) rather than examining outcomes in term of their valence (“positive” or “negative”). They also raise an important question, that of the reasons for goal endorsement. Indeed, the present issue suggests that achievement goals do not only come from particular dispositions but can also result from the adaptation to strong contextual demands (e.g., the selection process). This view of goals is fairly different from the traditional view of achievement goals and should open interesting perspectives in this research area.

In addition, we believe the present articles contribute to the question of goal promotion in the classrooms. Notably, they suggest that goal promotion should depend on what teachers want to do in their class (e.g., promote academic achievement, discourage cheating, foster strong interpersonal relations). They also show that discourse is not sufficient to convince students that some goals rather than others should or should not be endorsed in their class, and that important contextual factors (e.g., the grading structure) render performance-approach goals useful to success at the university in spite of the official discourse condemning them.

We are confident the present issue will contribute to the above questions by providing a new insight in goal theory that will help understanding mixed findings and open new perspectives in this research field; it should also provide useful practical suggestions.
on how to promote optimal motivation and behaviors in classrooms.

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