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When Performance-Approach Goals Predict Academic Achievement and When They Do Not: A Social Value Approach

Benoît Dompnier

Université de Lausanne

Céline Darnon

Clermont Université and Institut Universitaire de France

Fabrizio Butera

Université de Lausanne

Authors' Note

Benoît Dompnier and Fabrizio Butera, Institut des Sciences Sociales, Université de Lausanne, Switzerland; Céline Darnon, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale et Cognitive, Clermont Université, Clermont Ferrand, France. This research was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant number: 100014-135607) and by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (grant number: ANR-08-JCJC-0065-01). Requests for reprints should be addressed to Benoît Dompnier, Université de Lausanne, Géopolis, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland, (e-mail: Benoit.Dompnier@unil.ch)

Abstract

Research on achievement goal promotion at University has shown that performance-approach goals are perceived as a means to succeed at University (high social utility) but are not appreciated (low social desirability). We argue that such a paradox could explain why research has detected that performance-approach goals consistently predict academic grades. First-year psychology students answered a performance-approach goal scale with standard, social desirability and social utility instructions. Participants' grades were recorded at the end of the semester. Results showed that the relationship between performance-approach goals and grades was inhibited by the increase of these goals' social desirability and facilitated by the increase of their social utility, revealing that the predictive validity of performance-approach goals depend on social value.

Key words: Performance goals, social desirability, social utility, social judgment, academic achievement

When Performance-Approach Goals Predict Academic Achievement and When They Do Not: A Social Value Approach

With universities throughout the world devoting increasing attention to rankings and reinforcing competition and selection (OECD Observer, 2010), it becomes important to ask whether the desire to surpass others is really adaptive in an academic context. In achievement goal theory, the desire to outperform others corresponds to what has been called "performance-approach goals" (for a recent review, see Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). These goals are particularly interesting, as they have been the crux of an intense debate over the last 10 years (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Roeser, 2004). On the one hand, several researchers defend the idea that performance-approach goals are maladaptive in academic contexts because they are at odds with the main purpose of academia, i.e. learning; on the other hand, extensive results show that the more students endorse performance-approach goals, the better their academic performance is.

We contend that this debate illustrates how achievement goals are associated with very strong ideological values, endorsed by researchers and teachers, which in turn impacts the way students answer achievement goal scales. Indeed, research has demonstrated that achievement goals are associated to different aspects of social value, at least in psychology curricula where most of research on achievement goal theory were conducted (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey & Butera, 2009); in particular, psychology students appear especially ambivalent toward performance-approach goals, as they perceive them as highly useful to succeed at University, albeit "bad" goals in their teachers' eyes (Darnon et al., 2009; see also Dompnier, Darnon, Delmas, & Butera, 2008). The aim of the present paper is to test the hypothesis that the performance-approach goals – academic achievement link depend on the social value associated with such goals.

Achievement Goal Theory: a Motivational Approach to Achievement

Achievement goals are usually defined as "the purpose of achievement behavior" (Ames, 1992, p.261) and are assumed to explain interindividual differences in cognitions, affects, behaviors and achievement. Classically, achievement goal theory distinguishes two main categories of goals (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Legget, 1988). Mastery goals correspond to the desire to learn, to improve self-competence through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Performance goals correspond to the desire to demonstrate competence compared to others. In addition to the mastery-performance distinction, achievement goal theory also classifies goals as a function of their approach/avoidance tendencies (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Particularly relevant to the academic context is the distinction between performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals: Performance-approach goals correspond to the desire to outperform others and performance-avoidance goals correspond to the desire not to perform more poorly than others.

In the achievement goal literature, it is widely accepted that mastery goals are "adaptive" in academic contexts, in that they predict a host of positive outcomes such as interest, efforts, and cooperative behaviors (Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010). The effects of performance-approach goals are more ambiguous, and have generated a great deal of debate, unlike avoidance forms of achievement goals. On the one hand, these goals are related to negative emotions after failure (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009), undesirable behaviors such as cheating (Anderman & Danner, 2008; Murdock & Anderman, 2006), deleterious forms of conflict regulation (Darnon, Muller, Schrager, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2006) and correlate negatively with well-being (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). On the other hand, performance-approach goal endorsement has been positively linked to challenge construal, performance aspirations, and self-esteem (Elliot & Moller, 2003), but above all it has been shown to consistently and positively predict academic grades and success at University (Barron &

Harackiewicz, 2000, Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Harackiewicz et al. 2002). This link has been observed in large introductory classrooms (Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997; Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & Tauer, 2008; Hulleman, Durik, Schweigert, & Harackiewicz, 2008; Pekrun et al., 2009) and in more advanced seminars (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2003); on American students (Harackiewicz et al., 1997) and on European students (Darnon, Butera, Mugny, Quiamzade, & Hulleman, 2009); in the short and in the long term (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000).

Although empirical research documenting that performance-approach goals have positive consequences on achievement at the academic level is abundant, this idea has encountered much resistance (Midgley et al., 2001; Brophy, 2005; Roeser, 2004). These strong reactions suggest that performance-approach goals are the target of negative judgments from researchers and teachers.

Social Value of Achievement Goals

Recently, Darnon et al. (2009) have argued that performance-approach goals are negatively perceived by most psychology teachers and researchers, because these goals appear at odd with the ideology of learning typical of University. In particular, they predicted that the students' public endorsement of achievement goals would influence the way these students are perceived by others on the two fundamental dimensions of social perception: social desirability and social utility (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Beauvois, 2003; Beauvois & Dubois, 2009; Dubois & Beauvois, 2005; Pansu & Dompnier, 2011). Social desirability refers to the individuals' capacity to satisfy the motivations of the members of a given social group and corresponds to the degree to which they are liked. Social utility refers to the individuals' capacity to satisfy the functional requirements of a given social environment and corresponds to the degree to which they can succeed in this environment.

This research showed that, although students who highly endorsed mastery goals were perceived by judges (other students) as being both socially desirable (e.g. nice, warm) and socially useful (e.g. intelligent, competent), students who strongly endorsed performance-approach goals were judged as having a low probability to be liked by their teachers but paradoxically as also having a high probability to succeed at university. Indeed, because they fit the structure and functioning of the University system, and in particular its selection function based on normative grading and social comparison between students, performance-approach goals are perceived as socially useful. However, the fact that performance-approach goals challenge teachers' view of education makes these goals particularly low in terms of social desirability.

In addition to demonstrating the ambivalent social value of performance-approach goals, Darnon et al.'s (2009) research also showed that students were able to use their goal endorsement as a self-presentation strategy to influence their teachers' judgments. In sum, university students appear to be quite clearsighted as far as the social value of achievement goals in general, and performance-approach goals in particular, are concerned.

Moderating the Predictive Value of Performance-Approach Goals: A Social Value Approach

As presented above, much research has now demonstrated that performance-approach goals positively predict academic achievement, generally measured by the grade obtained on academic exams (Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 1997; Harackiewicz et al., 2002). We argue that the ambivalent social value of performance-approach goals could precisely be the reasons why, in these studies, a positive link between performance-approach goals and academic grade is observed. In other words, it might be because performance-approach goals are socially useful and socially undesirable that their link with academic performance is likely to appear.

More particularly, because performance-approach goals fit the structure and functioning of the University system, the more students are aware of these goals' efficacy within this system (i.e., their social utility), the more their commitment with these goals should predict their academic success. Therefore, the students' perception of performance-approach goals' adequacy with the University system, as measured by their perception of these goals' social utility, should positively moderate the relationship between goal endorsement and grade. Moreover, due to their inadequacy with the University ideology of learning, performance-approach goals are negatively perceived in terms of social desirability. This low social desirability baseline should discourage students to fake the endorsement of performance-approach goals. However, as their perception of social desirability of these goals increases, they may be tempted to use them as a self-presentation strategy. Thus, the increase in students' perception of performance-approach goals' social desirability should reduce the predictive validity of these goals and hide the link between goal endorsement and grades.

Some support for these predictions can be found in a research conducted by Dompnier, Darnon and Butera (2009). Even though this research focused on the mastery goals-achievement relationship predicted by achievement-goal theory but seldom encountered in the available data, it brings important support to our hypotheses. Indeed, these authors have shown that the relationship between mastery goals and academic achievement was inhibited by participants' perception of mastery goals' social desirability, but was also facilitated by their perception of mastery goals' social utility. Taken together, these two opposite and additive moderating effects reveal that the strongest link between mastery goals and academic achievement is observed when students highly perceive mastery goals as a means to succeed at University (high social utility) but do not perceive these goals as a means to garner teachers' appreciation (low social desirability). Interestingly, this specific configuration (high social utility and low social desirability) corresponds to the ecological social value of

performance-approach goals. Such a correspondence could indicate that the same processes apply for both mastery and performance-approach goals, notwithstanding the fact that these two goals have very different by default social desirability baselines: high for mastery goals and low for performance-approach goals. If this reasoning is correct, the link between performance-approach goals and academic achievement should be moderated by both the social desirability and the social utility associated with these goals, but in opposite directions.

Method

Participants

This study involved 266 French first-year psychology students. There were 232 women and 32 men (2 persons did not report their sex) with a mean age of 19.21 (SD = 1.77)[1].

Materials and Procedure

Data were collected during a semester-long social psychology class. At the beginning of the semester, each participant completed a three-item questionnaire corresponding to the performance-approach subscale of Elliot and McGregor's (2001) achievement goal scale (in the French version validated by Darnon & Butera, 2005). They indicated on a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all true for me*; 7 = *very true for me*) how important to them it was, in that class, "to do better than other students", "to do well compared to others" and "to get a better grade than most of the other students". As in Dompnier et al. (2009), participants responded to the questionnaire three times—first in a "standard" version and then according to two within-participants conditions ("social desirability" and "social utility").

This methodology, called the self-presentation paradigm (Gilibert & Cambon, 2003), enables to measure the participants' perceptions of the social value of a given construct through the change of their answers across instructions. More particularly, in the "standard" condition, participants simply indicated their level of agreement with each item (α = .89). In

the “social desirability” condition, participants were asked to respond to the items as if demonstrating that they possess all the qualities to make themselves popular with their teachers (α = .91). In the “social utility” condition, they were asked to respond to items as if demonstrating that they possess all the qualities to succeed at university in the eyes of their teachers (α = .88). In order to obtain an uncontaminated measure of students' a priori performance-approach goal endorsement, the standard version was always presented in the first position in the questionnaire; the order of presentation of the “social desirability” and “social utility” conditions were counterbalanced across participants[2].

Finally, participants had to report their grade relative to the baccalaureate, i.e. the final exam passed at the end of high school, usually obtained the year before their registration at University. This measure served as a control for initial differences in achievement level. Grades on the baccalaureate and grades on the final exam score both ranged from 0 to 20[3]. Students’ performance on the final exam was assessed using a multiple-choice questionnaire, including 30 questions on course content, each time presented with five possible answers. Points were subtracted for incorrect answers. The final exam score was computed electronically and corresponded to the sum of correct answers minus incorrect answers. It is important to note that participants' personal identity was not recorded. A number allowed to merge their final score with their answers but data were treated anonymously and students were informed of that.

One might wonder why students would care about teachers’ impressions of them in a course assessed solely by a multiple-choice exam marked by a computer. However, the literature on self-presentation and normative clearsightedness (e.g., Bressoux & Pansu, 2007; Dompnier et al., 2009) has consistently reported a positive correlation between scores obtained under standard instructions and scores obtained under normative or social desirability instructions. This consistent correlation indicates that students answer in the

direction of socially acceptable positions, even if they are informed that their answers would not be communicated to their teachers. Such a tendency can be interpreted as a form of compliance to the class situation, to the extent that trying to gain approval is one of the motivations that students may have in the classroom (Urdan, 1997). Means and inter-correlations among variables are presented in Table 1.

Results

The regression model used to analyze the data included 15 predictors: students' grades on the baccalaureate, a priori endorsement of performance-approach goals, endorsement of these goals in the social desirability and social utility conditions and all interactions products between these variables. All predictors were centered. The dependent variable was the students' grade on the final exam. Since participants' sex yielded no significant main effect or interactions with the other variables in preliminary analyses, it was not examined further.

The regression analysis revealed a main effect of the participants' grade on the baccalaureate, $b = 1.19$, $F(1, 250) = 20.18$, $p < .0001$, $PRE = .07$, indicating that the higher the students' grade on the baccalaureate, the higher their final grade. Despite the fact that the a priori endorsement of performance-approach goals was positively correlated with the course grade (cf. Table 1), the main effect of this variable was not significant in the complete model, $b = .23$, $F(1, 250) = 1.16$, $p < .29$, $PRE < .01$.

Results also revealed that, as predicted, the interaction between a priori endorsement of performance-approach goals and these goals' social desirability was significant, $b = -.27$, $F(1, 250) = 4.83$, $p < .03$, $PRE = .02$. As shown in Figure 1, as the students' perception of performance-approach goals' social desirability increased, the relationship between the endorsement of performance-approach goals and course grade decreased. Analyses of simple slopes indicated that this relationship was significant and positive for participants low in perception of performance-approach goals' social desirability (-1 SD), $b = .70$, $F(1, 250) =$

6.67, $p < .02$. It was not significant for participants high in perception of performance-approach goals' social desirability (+1 SD), $b = -.24$, $F(1, 250) < 1$.

Finally, the regression analysis indicated that, as predicted, the interaction between the endorsement of performance-approach goals and students' perception of these goals' social utility was significant, $b = .41$, $F(1, 250) = 7.58$, $p < .01$, $PRE = .03$. As the students' perception of performance-approach goals' social utility increased, the relationship between the endorsement of performance-approach goals and course grade increased (see Figure 2). Simple slopes tests indicated that this relationship was significant and positive for participants high in perception of the performance-approach goals' social utility (+1 SD), $b = .93$, $F(1, 250) = 10.52$, $p < .01$. It was not significant for participants low in perception of performance-approach goals' social utility (-1 SD), $b = -.47$, $F(1, 250) = 1.57$, $p < .21$. No other effect reached significance, Fs $(1, 250) \leq 2.75$, ps $\geq .10$, PREs $< .01$.

Discussion

Extensive research has been conducted to document the link between performance-approach goals and academic achievement. However, this research has overlooked the social value attached to these goals in the context in which they are expressed (Darnon et al., 2009). We argued that the positive relationship often observed between performance-approach goal endorsement and academic performance (see Harackiewicz et al., 2002) could depend on students' by default perception of performance-approach goals' social desirability and social utility. In line with this reasoning, results indicated that the extent to which students perceived performance-approach goals as a means to be appreciated by their teachers (social desirability) or as a means to succeed at University (social utility) moderated the predictive validity of their spontaneous goal endorsement. In particular, the more students perceived performance-approach goals as socially desirable, the lower the relationship between their performance-approach goal endorsement and their score on the final test. Moreover, the more

students perceived performance-approach goals as socially useful, the stronger the link between goal endorsement and final performance. Overall, these results confirm that the relationship between performance-approach goals and academic success depends on a facilitating factor – students' perceptions of performance-approach goals' social utility – and an inhibiting factor – students' perceptions of performance-approach goals' social desirability[4].

These results also reveal an interesting and potentially fruitful parallel in the way social utility and social desirability operate for different goals. As noted above, Dompnier et al. (2009) found that the relationship between mastery goals and academic achievement depends on students' perceptions of mastery goals' social utility and social desirability. Coupled with the results of our current study, it appears that the same moderators impact both mastery and performance-approach goals, notwithstanding the fact that these two goals have very different social desirability baselines. Indeed, both mastery goals and performance-approach goals are socially useful within the University system (Darnon et al., 2009). Even if they may imply different cognitive processes (e.g. intrinsic motivation and information processing related to the task for mastery goals; social comparison and information processing related to appraisal of others for performance-approach goals), both categories of goals correspond to what students have to do within the University system, namely to learn (mastery goals) and to be better than their fellow students (performance-approach goals). However, these two categories of goals are not equivalent in terms of social desirability. Such a difference might explain why research has encountered difficulties to demonstrate the mastery goals – achievement link but not the performance-approach – achievement link. Indeed, because mastery goals are socially desirable, they can be reported by students for self-presentation purposes. This logic does not spontaneously apply to performance-approach goals. Indeed, by default, performance-approach goals are not perceived by most students as a

means to garner teachers' appreciation (low social desirability), which means that students who spontaneously endorse performance-approach goals are more likely to truly pursue these goals. However, social desirability can still reduce the predictive validity of performance-approach goal measure as the students' perceptions of these goals' social desirability increase. In other words, taking into account the achievement goals' social value allows discriminating students who endorse these goals for different reasons, namely for self-presentation purposes (social desirability) or for success purposes (social utility), and enables to quantify a qualitative change in the meaning of participants' answers to an achievement goal scale. In this respect, the present research represents a first step toward a new approach to achievement goals that considers the endorsement of goals as a way to express some social value.

In addition to propose a new look to results obtained in achievement goal research, the social value perspective adopted in this research may also explain why different performance-approach goal scales do not predict academic performance to the same extent. Indeed, in a recent meta-analysis, Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, and Harackiewicz (2010) observed that performance-approach goals predicted more positively academic outcomes when they were measured with some scales (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001) than with other (e.g., Migdley et al., 2001). The present research connects to this observation by suggesting that a possible explanation for this variability could be that performance-approach goal scales may vary in terms of social value, allowing or not to detect the true relationship between performance-approach goals and academic performance. Therefore, an avenue for future research to specify the results of the present research would be to look at the social value attached to different operationalisations of achievement goals to determine to what extent such variability explains changes in the relationship between goal endorsement and various external criteria.

More generally, this research highlights the importance of considering goals as reflecting not only students’ deep motivation but also the social structure in which goals

measures are taken. Indeed, achievement goals are not expressed in a social vacuum and students' goal endorsement may be influenced by the ideological and functional constraints of the social environment to which they belong, namely the University system.

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Footnotes

[1] The present study is part of a larger project. It should be noted that the data presented in this article were drawn from the same sample of first-year psychology students as Dompnier et al.'s (2009) research. However, all the variables (both IVs and DV, as well as the covariate) analysed and presented in the present paper are different from those used in this previous research. Indeed, focusing on a different type of achievement goals (i.e., performance-approach goals), the present results were obtained on a different performance measure.

[2] It should be noted that these measures do not capture dispositional tendencies toward social desirability or social utility, but the perceived social desirability or social utility of performance approach goals.

[3] The pass level for both performance measures is 10. As indicated by Table 1, the mean for the baccalaureate ($M = 11.44$) is above the pass level, which is a result of the selection process (only students who obtained at least 10 out of 20 on the baccalaureate were allowed to leave high school and to register at university). On the contrary, the mean for the final exam ($M = 7.97$) is below the pass level but quite representative of the level usually obtained by first-year students.

[4] Despite the fact that the first-year psychology student sample of this research is typical of many student samples examined in previous achievement goal research, it has specific properties that could limit the generality of the results obtained. Thus, future research should investigate student samples that include more male participants, in more competitive educational settings (e.g., business schools).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Performance-approach goals (standard)	3.34	1.46	1				
2. Performance-approach goals' social desirability	3.38	1.76	.39**	1			
3. Performance-approach goals' social utility	5.31	1.73	.26**	.42**	1		
4. Grade on the baccalaureate	11.44	1.27	.17*	.01	-.05	1	
5. Course grade	7.97	4.41	.16*	-.01	.03	.29**	1

Note. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

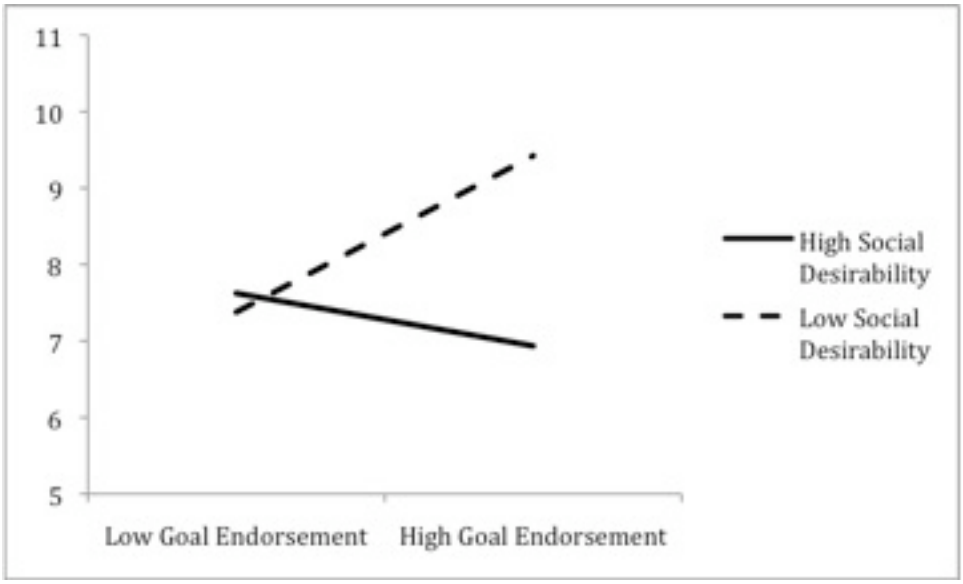

Figure 1. Relationship between students' course grade (range = 0-20) and their level of endorsement of performance-approach goals. Simple slopes are shown separately for students who perceived performance-approach goals as having a high (+1SD) and low social desirability (-1SD).

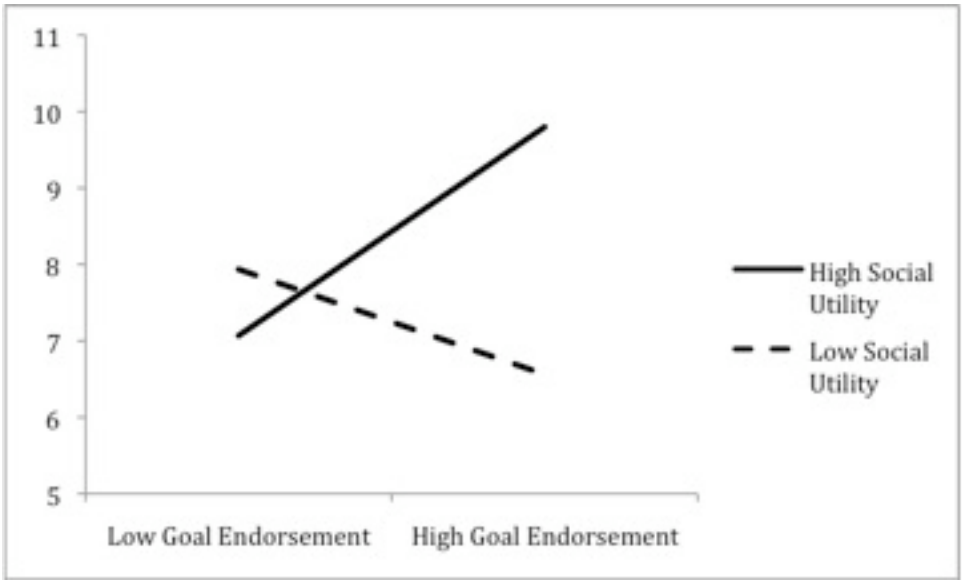

Figure 2. Relationship between students' course grade (range = 0-20) and their level of endorsement of performance-approach goals. Simple slopes are shown separately for students who perceived performance-approach goals as having a high (+1SD) and low social utility (-1SD).