



# Extending hierarchical achievement motivation models: The role of motivational needs for achievement goals and academic performance



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## ABSTRACT

In the current study, we investigated the role of three basic motivational needs (need for power, affiliation, achievement) as antecedents of goals within the  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal framework, and examined their combined predictive validity with regard to academic performance in a sample of 120 university students. Structural equation modeling analysis largely supported our postulated model, linking motivational needs indirectly to course grades through goals. Achievement goals were formed by a combination of different motives: need for achievement was a positive predictor of all four achievement goals, and need for affiliation was negatively related to performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. Additionally, need for power was a positive predictor of performance-avoidance goals. Performance-approach goals had a direct (positive) effect on performance outcomes. In sum, our results integrate basic motivational needs with the achievement goals literature and extend therefore hierarchical achievement motivation models, by showing how basic human motives of achievement, affiliation, and power are related to goal striving motivation and performance outcomes in an academic setting.

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## 1. Introduction

In the field of achievement motivation, achievement goals belong to the most frequently studied variables with important implications for performance in various settings, such as schools, sports, or work (Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007). Achievement goals act as proximal antecedents of behavior that energize, direct, and guide behavior in achievement situations and are generally considered manifestations of more abstract dispositions (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). One such disposition in particular, the achievement motive, has received considerable research attention (Thrash & Hurst, 2008; Urdan, 1997) and has been integrated into hierarchical models of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999). However, the role of other basic human motives as antecedents of achievement goals, especially with regard to social motives, is less well understood, and the interplay of goals within the  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) with motivational needs as predictors of academic performance has not been sufficiently investigated yet.

The main aim of the current study was to extend hierarchical achievement motivation models with reference to three fundamental motivational needs. In detail, we investigated the role of need for achievement, affiliation, and power (McClelland, 1987) as antecedents of achievement goals. To provide a comprehensive test of the link of motives with goals, we applied the  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) by integrating approach and avoidance aspects of both mastery and performance goals in our study. Furthermore, we investigated their combined effect with basic motives on academic performance.

### 1.1. Motivational needs and achievement goals

The  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) holds that achievement goals refer to either mastery (i.e. development of competence) or performance (i.e. demonstrating competence) goals, that can be further divided into approach or avoidance goals. Striving to demonstrate high ability and validate one's competence in relation to others refers to *performance-approach goals* (PAP), whereas strategies that prevent the individual from showing a lack of competence or obtain unfavorable judgments from others indicate *performance-avoidance goals* (PAV). Similarly, *mastery-approach goals* (MAP) refer to the striving to master new tasks and the approach of success, whereas

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*mastery-avoidance goals* (MAV) focus on the avoidance of task-based or intrapersonal incompetence (e.g. avoid to do worse than before, or avoid losing one's skills).

Various variables have been suggested to act as antecedents of achievement goals. For example, prior studies seem to support the role of individual differences (in terms of stable disposition) as antecedents of (situation specific) goals (Bipp, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2008; Payne et al., 2007). Given that several conceptualizations of goals draw from the achievement motivation literature, it seems valuable to examine in-depth the relationships of basic motivational needs with achievement goals on a theoretical and empirical level. Although Urdan (1997) already emphasized that definitions of achievement goals show resemblance to certain motives, to date a comprehensive empirical examination of the relationship of fundamental motivational needs and goals is lacking.

Motives refer to fundamental, stable dispositions that direct a person's behavior through the appraisal of action consequences. Building on Murray's (1938) and McClelland's (1987) motivation theories, three classes of needs, "the Big Three of motivation" (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001, p. 72), have received extensive attention in this research field: need for achievement, i.e. the need to do something better; need for affiliation, i.e. the need for friendly relationships; and need for power, i.e. the need to have an impact.

Already Atkinson and Reitman (1956) highlighted that motives influence the striving for certain goals. More recently, Elliot and colleagues (e.g. Elliot, 1999; Thrash & Hurst, 2008) took an important step by integrating the literatures on motives and achievement goals. Within hierarchical achievement motivation models, goals are seen as midlevel constructs that act as proximal antecedents of behavior through which individuals pursue their more general motives. Therefore, goals are linked to, but conceptually different from motives or needs that act as their antecedents. Elliot, Conroy, Barron, and Murayama (2010) proposed that the same goal can be used to realize different motivational needs, and that one specific motivational need can be channeled through different goals. Yet, only one motive has been incorporated in these models: need for achievement (or its subspect fear of failure) has been shown to influence achievement outcomes indirectly via achievement goals (Elliot & Church, 1997). However, the connection of the other basic motivational needs with achievement goals is less well understood.

We expected vital relationships of all three motivational needs (achievement, affiliation, and power) with achievement goals. First, prior research supports relationships of motive dispositions with personal strivings (in terms of broad goals) (Emmons & McAdams, 1991). Second, the distinction of approach and avoidance dimensions in motives (e.g. hope to approach success, fear to avoid failure; McClelland, 1953) suggests strong associations with specific goal dimensions. Third, social comparison and the ambition to outperform others plays a central role especially for performance goals (Elliot, 2005). Therefore, we expected that besides the need for achievement also social motives trigger the pursuit of achievement goals. In the following, we outline the expected connections for the extension of hierarchical achievement motivation models by discussing construct definitions, and presenting prior research findings.

#### 1.1.1. Need for achievement (*nAch*)

Definitions of *nAch* refer to the need to do something better or faster, accomplish a difficult task, overcome obstacles, or to prove ones talent. In various conceptualizations, a standard of excellence is included (McClelland, 1953; Murray, 1938) that can relate either to oneself (to excel) or to others (to compete or surpass others). As such, *nAch* refers to the need "to establish competence relative to the task, self, and others" (Baranik, Stanley, Bynum, &

Lance, 2010, p. 269), and incorporates personal mastery and the tendency to compete with others. Therefore, we expected a positive relationship of *nAch* with performance and mastery goals. Although theoretical conceptualizations suggested connection of this motive predominantly to approach goals (Elliot & Church, 1997), and prior findings resulted in mixed results for the avoidance dimension (Nie & Liem, 2013), a recent meta-analysis supports also positive connections of *nAch* with MAV and PAV (Baranik et al., 2010). Elliot and Murayama (2008) offered a potential explanation for such an effect with regard to MAV: to accomplish or succeed in a task sometimes also demands to avoid errors or mistakes, which we assumed should also be the case if one is trying to perform not worse than others (PAV).

**Hypothesis 1.** *nAch* is positively related to (a) MAP, (b) MAV, (c) PAP, and (d) PAV.

#### 1.1.2. Need for affiliation (*nAff*)

Already in the 1930s, Murray (1938) identified a social need central to human functioning that refers to building and maintaining warm and close relationships. People with high *nAff* enjoy the company of others, feel a sense of involvement and belonging with a group. Support for a link of this motivational need with achievement goals can be found in early goal conceptualizations (Urdan & Maehr, 1995) that highlight the potential conflict between social and achievement motives, and emphasize the role of goals that refer to conformity with norms, or the need to gain approval from others. Similarly, more recent models refer to relationally-based variables (e.g. the fear of being rejected by others; Elliot, 1999) as antecedents of achievement goals. Given that other-based standards and social comparison play a central role for performance goals (Elliot & Murayama, 2008), we expected *nAff* to be negatively linked in particular to those goals. First, people with high scores on *nAff* have been shown to prefer noncompetitive situations (McClelland, 1987), so that we expected them to report a lower tendency to perform better than others (PAP). Second, Murayama and Elliot (2012) found that the dispositional preference to compete in contrast to cooperate with others (a sign of low *nAff*), activates both approach and avoidance goals, and therefore also triggers (e.g. through anxiety) the tendency to avoid performing poorly compared to others (PAV). The need to belong to a certain group (*nAff*) might therefore not lead to high PAV, as performing worse than others might actually be an effective strategy to build and maintain relationships in academic settings. Also, Payne et al. (2007) supported that Agreeableness (a related trait of *nAff*) correlates negatively with such goals.

**Hypothesis 2.** *nAff* is negatively related to (a) PAP, and (b) PAV.

#### 1.1.3. Need for power (*nP*)

The power motive refers to the desire to feel strong, and to have impact on or control others. Typically, such a need is expressed in forceful or assertive actions, such as aggression, and in attempts to influence, persuade, impress, or dominate others (Schmalt & Heckhausen, 2008). Given the common grounds in terms of a focus on others, we expected *nP* to relate to both types of performance goals. First, we expected *nP*, as a need to feel superior, to positively relate to the tendency to prove one's ability in relation to others (PAP). Indeed, Chiaburu, Marinova, and Lim (2007) found that status striving, a motivational orientation in terms of power or dominance, was positively associated with such performance goals. Second, we expected that this need also triggers the goal to avoid looking incompetent or less able than others, therefore high values on *nP* should be associated with higher PAV.

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