



Dispositional achievement motives matter for autonomous versus controlled motivation and behavioral or affective educational outcomes



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated whether autonomous and controlled situational achievement motivation function as mediating processes through which dispositional achievement motives are manifested in affective and behavioral outcomes. Structural Equation Modeling with three student samples (Greek $N = 440$; Belgian $N = 283$; German $N = 264$) indicated that need for achievement related positively to positive affect and adaptive studying strategies via autonomous motivation. In contrast, fear of failure related positively to negative affect and negatively to adaptive studying strategies via controlled motivation. Additionally, dispositional achievement motives were directly related to affect outcomes verifying their affect-base as argued in achievement motivation theory. The importance of individual differences in achievement motive dispositions for situational autonomous and controlled motivation is discussed.

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1. Introduction

The last 15 years, the achievement goal perspective has incorporated the classic approach of dispositional achievement motives (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953) into a hierarchical achievement motivation model (Elliot & Church, 1997) in which need for achievement and fear of failure are considered as the energizers of achievement behavior that manifest through the pursuit of achievement goals (Elliot, 2006). The hierarchical model focuses on the links between the two dispositional achievement motives and the adopted achievement goals, or the “what” of achievement goal striving. However, an equally important motivational variable concerns the reasons underlying the engagement in achievement behavior, that is, the “why” of goal striving (Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, & Lens, 2010). The links between the dispositional achievement motives and the “why” of achievement striving have been scarcely investigated (see Sheldon & Cooper, 2008). Can we claim that the effects of need for achievement and fear of failure on achievement outcomes can also be mediated by the “why” of achievement striving? In this study we recruited

three samples coming from different countries (i.e., Greece, Belgium and Germany) and educational settings (i.e., high school and university) and investigated the neglected relation of dispositional achievement motives to autonomous and controlling reasons for engagement in achievement behavior as these are operationally defined by the Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). We also examined the direct and indirect (through autonomous versus controlling reasons) relations of need for achievement and fear of failure to students’ affective and behavioral outcomes. Similarities and differences among the three different samples of the present study will further clarify the possibility to generalize the obtained results.

1.1. Achievement motives and autonomous versus controlled motivation

In achievement motivation theory, need for achievement and fear of failure are defined as acquired motivational dispositions to, respectively, approach success and avoid failure. Need for achievement has been defined as the basis of an appetitive tendency to strive for success, and fear of failure as the origin of an inhibitory tendency to avoid failure (Atkinson & Feather, 1966). Atkinson (1964) defines the strength of situational achievement motivation as the product of need for achievement (or fear of failure), the probability of success (or failure), and the anticipated value of the success (or failure). There are situations where the

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probability of success (a potential intrinsic component) is high and the value is reflected through receiving a contingent reward (an extrinsic component). In such situations the total motivation is high, yet pressuring because of the extrinsic component. Thus the quality (and not only the strength) of the total achievement motivation in terms of volitional (autonomous) or pressuring (controlling) incentives is important to be taken into consideration as it could have unique links with the more general motive dispositions (i.e., the need for achievement and fear of failure).

A student with a high need for achievement (and a low fear of failure) is oriented toward success in achievement tasks. For such a student, task engagement could be more pleasurable or personally important because her engagement serves as a means to attain success. According to SDT, an inherent pleasure in an activity requires an intrinsic motive, whereas a personally important activity presupposes an identified motive, both forms of autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

A student with a high fear of failure (and a low need for achievement) is oriented toward the avoidance of achievement tasks. However, when such a student cannot avoid such a threatening situation, (e.g., obligatory assignments at school or high-stakes final exams at the University) she is more likely to engage in a task because of a strong extrinsic (i.e., controlled) motivation (e.g., to obey parents (i.e., external motives), or to avoid feelings of guilt (i.e., introjected motive)). SDT classifies these types of motives as controlled motivation.

Need for achievement and fear of failure establish in childhood through parenting practices that provoke particular affective responses (McClelland, 1987). Hence, achievement motives are inherently not only competence-based but also relational- and affect-based dispositions (Elliot & Thrash, 2004). Parents and other socializing agents (e.g., teachers) play an important role in the formation of achievement-related motives (Winterbottom, 1958) as through the provided competence-related feedback they can elicit to a child feelings of pride (after successful accomplishments) or shame (after failures).

The affective base of achievement motives could be an additional factor that may improve or impair the integration of the behavior into the self and thus may promote or inhibit autonomous motivation. One who has acquired a general capacity to take pride in accomplishment is more likely to perceive one's behavior or values in a specific context as instigated by the true self (i.e., autonomous motivation). Pride is the result of a behavior dictated by the self. In contrast, one who has acquired a general capacity to feel shame due to failure is more likely to be receptive to external or to internal pressuring incentives like guilt (i.e., controlled motivation).

This reasoning leads to the assumption that need for achievement facilitates the integrative process of the inner and outer world and thus is linked with autonomous motivation. It also leads to the hypothesis that fear of failure inhibits organismic integration and therefore is linked with controlled motivation. Sheldon and Cooper (2008) found need for achievement to relate to autonomous (but not to controlled) motivation when competence-based role-goals (e.g., at school) were adopted. However fear of failure has not been investigated and it remains underexplored if it instigates controlled motivation.

In the present study we aimed to investigate in educational settings the neglected relation between dispositional achievement motives and autonomous versus controlled students' motivation. We focused on educational settings because in such contexts individuals cannot avoid task engagement. Therefore, we expected that achievement motivation for those high in fear of failure would manifest through controlled motivation. We also examined the mediating role of autonomous versus controlled motivation between dispositional achievement motives and students' positive/negative

affect, anxiety (i.e., affective outcomes), time management and test strategy (i.e., behavioral outcomes).

1.2. Educational correlates of achievement motives

The need for achievement has been linked through approach achievement goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001) to numerous positive educational outcomes, including intrinsic motivation, optimal performance, self-regulatory strategies, and positive feelings (Urda, 1997). In contrast, fear of failure is considered to lead to task avoidance, performance avoidance goals and various negative educational outcomes like underperformance and decreased intrinsic motivation. Unlike the theory of achievement motivation (Atkinson & Feather, 1966), the achievement goal perspective argues that fear of failure can lead also to the adoption of performance-approach goals as an attempt to avoid failure (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). However, when the direct relation of fear of failure to outcomes was investigated, fear of failure was associated positively to behavioral problems and negatively to school engagement and academic competence (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003). It seems that need for achievement and fear of failure are, respectively, positive and negative predictors of students' optimal functioning.

1.3. The present study

We aimed to investigate the relation of explicit measures of need for achievement and fear of failure to autonomous and controlled motivation in educational settings. Following the reasoning that need for achievement facilitates the organismic integration of the inner and outer world, we hypothesized a positive relation between need for achievement and autonomous motivation. Assuming also that fear of failure instigates pressure for someone who cannot avoid a threatening achievement situation, we hypothesized a positive relation between fear of failure and controlled motivation. We presumed that high school students cannot but undertake homework and that university students cannot but take final exams. Although we believe that challenging tasks (assignments or final exams) might have different connotations for high school and university students, we presumed that fear of failure engenders similar process in both contexts that is controlled motivation.

We also aimed to investigate the relations of achievement motives to affective and behavioral outcomes. Regarding the affective outcomes, we assumed that need for achievement and fear of failure, given their affective base, would relate not only indirectly (through autonomous versus controlled motivation, respectively) but also directly to positive and negative affect and anxiety. There are two additional reasons to expect such direct relationships. First, because need for achievement implies a behavioral activation system which is likely to generate positive affect while fear of failure denotes a behavioral inhibition system that is likely to generate negative affect (Gray, 1994). Second, because the scale of achievement motivation that we used to assess achievement motivation taps to some extent affect experiences emerging in achievement situations.

Regarding the behavioral outcomes, we hypothesized only an indirect relation of achievement motives to time management and test strategy. This hypothesis of indirect relation is justified by the competence-base nature of approaching success or avoiding failure which demands a more strategic cognitive-motivational process in order to be guided to particular behavior (Elliot, 2006). Therefore, in our study we considered autonomous and controlling regulations as the necessary strategic cognitive-motivational processes through which achievement motives are channeled to behavioral outcomes. Specifically, we hypothesized that need for achievement will relate positively to adaptive study strategies (i.e., time management and test strategy) through autonomous motivation as previous studies have shown that autonomous

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