



## Dominant achievement goals of older workers and their relationship with motivation-related outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to increase our insight into older employees' achievement motivation by examining the prevalence of dominant achievement goals among a "unique" group of 172 Dutch workers who remained active after their post-statutory retirement age. Moreover, we investigated how their dominant achievement goals were linked to motivation-related outcomes (i.e., work engagement and meaning of work). Our results showed that, relative to younger workers, a significantly higher amount of older workers endorsed dominant mastery-avoidance goals. In addition, as expected, older workers with dominant mastery-approach goals scored highest, while the workers with dominant mastery-avoidance goals scored lowest in work engagement, social and personal meaning of work. Theoretical as well as practical implications of these results are discussed.

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In view of the world-wide graying of the workforce (Gobeski & Beehr, 2009; Waite, 2004), it is important to examine the achievement motivation of aging workers. Demographic transitions, i.e., aging and dejuvenization of the working population has already occurred in most developed countries, and is rapidly underway in many developing nations as well (Alley & Crimmins, 2007). Consequently, the composition and supply of the workforce is diverging: the proportion of older workers is growing, while the number of available younger workers is contracting. This scenario presents critical challenges for numerous stakeholders (e.g., politicians, managers, career counselors, and employees) across industries and countries (Alley & Crimmins, 2007; Burkhauser & Quinn, 1997). One of the challenges is that companies will have to rely increasingly on the contribution of older employees. Although this group of workers has attracted considerable research interest during the past decade, age-related HRM policies still have not resulted in sound career development investigations and practices aimed to respond to the needs of the labor market. Moreover, there is a serious lack of studies including workers aged 60 or above (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2008; Stroh & Greller, 1995; Warr, 2008).

The objective of this study was therefore to improve our understanding of the achievement motivation of workers who remain active after their post-statutory retirement age, by examining the prevalence of their dominant achievement goals, and their impact upon motivation-related outcomes. Before addressing the specific hypotheses of this study, we will first discuss some relevant concepts, theories, and available research related to aging and achievement motivation.

### Achievement Motivation

The goal approach to achievement motivation has emerged as a highly influential theoretical framework for understanding how people define, experience, and respond to competence-relevant situations, including the workplace (Elliot, 2005). Originally,

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achievement goals were examined in terms of two major types, namely mastery and performance goals (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). *Mastery* goals focus on task-based and *intrapersonal* standards of competence, while *performance* goals focus on *interpersonal* standards of competence. The most sophisticated achievement goal model is the 2×2 model developed by Elliot (e.g., Elliot, 1999). In this model, the distinction between *approach* (focusing on obtaining positive or desirable events) versus *avoidance* (focusing on avoiding negative or undesirable events) are incorporated into the conceptualizations of achievement goals. Accordingly, it comprises four types of goals: *mastery-approach* goals (focusing on the attainment of task-based or *intrapersonal* standards of competence), *performance-approach* goals (focusing on the attainment of *interpersonal* standards of competence), *mastery-avoidance* goals (focusing on the avoidance of task-based or *intrapersonal* standards of incompetence), and *performance-avoidance* goals (focusing on the avoidance of *interpersonal* standards of incompetence).

Relying on the dominant achievement goal approach (Van Yperen, 2003, 2006), there is increasing empirical evidence that mastery-avoidance goals are highly prevalent, which may be especially true among older workers. For example, Elliot and McGregor (2001) suspected that particularly “elderly people ... begin to focus on not performing worse than before, not stagnating, or not losing their skills, abilities or memory” (p. 502). Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, to date, no empirical study has explicitly examined the prevalence and effects of achievement goals among older workers. Therefore, life span developmental theory is applied to postulate theory-based expectations on the prevalence of mastery-avoidance goals among older workers, and on its impact upon motivation-related outcomes.

### Aging, Achievement Motivation, and Work Outcomes

According to Maehr and Kleiber (1981), with an increase in age, achievement motivation may shift from a more extrinsic, competitive pattern of achievement to a more intrinsic, mastery-related pattern. In general, older people are characterized by conservatism, cautiousness, and affiliation, rather than by competition, and may become more focused on short-term than long-term goals (cf. Botwinick, 1966). Generativity (i.e., focusing on developing or coaching others) tends to become more important among older workers who have already established success in their midlife age period (Erikson, 1963; Neugarten, 1977).

In a study of Holahan (1988), among 814 older working adults (mean age was 70.2 years; with ages ranging from 65 to 75 years), it was found that achievement motivation, operationalized as approach motivation only, without distinguishing between mastery and performance goals, was positively related to health as well as psychological well-being. Another study by Caldwell, Herold, and Fedor (2004) found that, particularly, mastery goals become more prevalent among older workers. Summarizing, the scarce available research presents some evidence that older workers can be characterized by a stronger focus on standards of competence that are intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, defined, and emerge to a greater extent out of the activities themselves (i.e., mastery) than out of interpersonal or other-referenced standards (i.e., performance; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2000; Maehr & Kleiber, 1981). However, to date, there are no studies that provide information on the valence (avoidance versus approach) of mastery and performance goals among older workers (>60 years).

### Life Span Developmental Theory

According to the *Socioemotional Selectivity* theory of Carstensen (1995), individuals will select goals in accordance with their perceptions of the future as being limited or open-ended (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). Older generations are assumed to perceive time as more constraint, holding a “time till death” perspective, and will be more motivated by achieving short-term and avoidance-related goals, such as deepening one's existing relations. Similarly, the *Selection Optimization with Compensation* (SOC) model of Baltes, Staudinger, and Lindenberger (1999), states that, due to the loss of biological, mental, and social reserves across the life span, the allocation of resources for so-called maintenance and regulation of “loss or prevention” goals will increase with age. Indeed, several researchers (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006; Freund, 2006; Heckhausen, 1997) have demonstrated that a person's goal orientation changes across the life span, revealing evidence for a stronger orientation on maintenance and loss prevention among older compared to younger people. The gradual diminution of physical and mental skills and abilities during the aging process may therefore strengthen one's tendency to adopt avoidance goals (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Maehr & Kleiber, 1981). To conclude, based on the aforementioned work on achievement motivation and age (e.g., Maehr & Kleiber, 1981), the *Socioemotional Selectivity* theory (Carstensen, 1995), and the SOC model (Baltes et al., 1999), we formulated the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a.** Relative to younger workers, a higher number of older workers will hold dominant mastery-avoidance goals.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Among older workers, dominant mastery-avoidance goals will be more prevalent than the others goals from the 2×2 achievement goal framework.

### Links between Achievement Goals and Motivation-Related Outcomes among Older Workers

Besides our interest in the prevalence of dominant achievement goals among older workers, we aimed at a better understanding of the associations between their achievement goals and motivation-related outcomes (i.e., work engagement and meaning of work), an issue which has been largely neglected to date (Barness-Farrell & Matthews, 2007; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, in press). Work engagement (defined as a positive affective-motivational state of

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