



Competitiveness is not that bad. . .at least in the East: Testing the hierarchical model of achievement motivation in the Asian setting

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ABSTRACT

Competitiveness has usually been viewed as a negative trait as it leads to suboptimal outcomes. However, research in cross-cultural psychology has indicated that competitiveness may hold different meanings for people from individualist and collectivist cultures. The current study investigates the effects of competitiveness on different educational outcomes in the collectivistic Chinese cultural context. Utilizing the hierarchical model of achievement motivation, this study aims to examine the relationships among individual differences (trait mastery and trait competitiveness), achievement goals (mastery and performance goals), and learning strategies (deep and surface learning strategies). Six hundred ninety-seven secondary school students from Hong Kong answered questionnaires assessing the relevant variables. Path models indicated that there were important differences in the pattern of relationships among the variables in our study compared to previous findings in the West. First, contrary to Western studies, trait competitiveness was predictive of mastery goals and not only of performance goals. Second, performance goals positively predicted the adoption of deep learning strategies but were not significantly related to surface learning strategies. Results are discussed in light of current findings in cross-cultural psychology. The findings hold substantive theoretical and practical implications for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand achievement motivation of students from more collectivist cultures.

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1. Introduction

Competition has received a lot of bad press. It has been associated with a host of maladaptive outcomes such as negative well-being, suboptimal learning, extrinsic orientation, aggression (Ryckman, Hammer, Kaczor, & Gold, 1996), low self-efficacy (Chan & Lam, 2008), prejudice (Sassenberg, Moskowitz, Jacoby, & Hansen, 2007), conflict among friends (Schneider, Fonzi, Tomada, & Tani, 2000), pathological gambling (Parke, Griffiths, & Irwing, 2004), and even reckless driving (Harris & Houston, 2010) among others.

Within the more specialized field of educational psychology, competitiveness has also been frequently associated with maladaptive consequences such as increased stress, depression, (Dykman, 1998), and avoidance of school work (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002). Although this generally negative view towards competition is slowly being challenged (e.g. Ryckman et al., 1996), the psychological literature still defines it as suboptimal. In fact, most researchers measure competition as the direct opposite of cooperation (e.g. Stapel & Koomen, 2005). However, it might be time for educational psychologists to reconsider this negative view of

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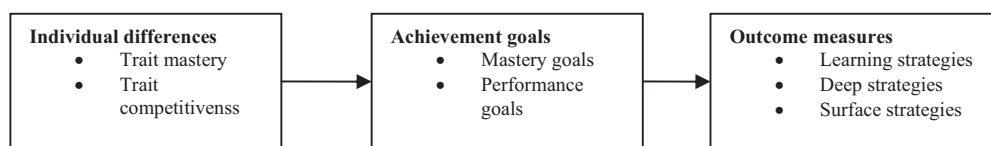


Fig. 1. Adapted from the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Church, 1997).

competitiveness given that recent research in cross-cultural psychology has indicated that competition is a culture-bound construct. It holds a different meaning for peoples from different cultures (Grum & Kolenc, 2008; Houston, Harris, Moore, Brummett, & Kametani, 2005; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). More specifically, within the educational domain it has been found that students from individualist countries are more likely to perceive competition as negative leading to a zero-sum situation while students from collectivist societies, on the other hand, are more likely to perceive competition as positive, leading to the improvement of themselves and society (Fulop, 1999, 2005; Watkins, 2007, 2009). These divergent views on competition may lead to differences in how competitiveness influences various outcomes.

Given these cross-cultural differences, it might be possible that the effects of competitiveness in a collectivistic culture like China would be different from those found in Western settings. To test this proposition, we used the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Church, 1997) which posited that trait variables/individual differences predicted achievement goals which in turn predicted various outcomes. The utility of this model lay in the fact that it included two key constructs that are closely associated with competition in the educational psychology literature: trait competitiveness and performance goals (Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, et al., 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, et al., 2002). This allowed us to test whether the pattern of relationships found among these constructs in the West was also applicable to the collectivistic Chinese setting. Studies in the West have unanimously hailed trait mastery and mastery goals as beneficial while casting a more negative light on competitiveness and performance goals (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001a, 2001b). However, because of cross-cultural differences in the meaning of competition, the relationships among these constructs in the Chinese setting may be different from what previous research has found in the West.

2. Literature review

The hierarchical model of achievement motivation has become the dominant paradigm for examining students' motivation (Elliot, 2005). The basic proposition is that individual differences predict achievement goals which in turn predict various educational outcomes. Studies utilizing this framework have focused on a variety of individual difference variables such as trait mastery and trait competitiveness as antecedents of achievement goals (e.g. Harackiewicz et al., 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, et al., 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, et al., 2002). With regard to outcome measures, learning strategies, exam performance, intrinsic motivation, interest, and others have all been explored in previous studies (e.g. Wolters, 2004). Each of the components of this model will be discussed in greater detail below (see Fig. 1).

2.1. Achievement goals

Achievement goals have been conceptualized as the purpose of task engagement (Maehr, 1989). This theory was originally grounded in a distinction between mastery goals and performance goals (Elliot, 2005). Students who pursue mastery goals are focused on the development of task mastery and competence, while those who pursue performance goals emphasize the demonstration of competence relative to others. This dichotomous conceptualization was later replaced with the trichotomous goal theory (Elliot & Church, 1997). In this framework, the conventional performance goal was bifurcated into conceptually distinct approach and avoidance goals. Three goals were posited: a mastery goal focused on the development of self-referenced competence, a performance-approach goal focused on the attainment of normative competence, and a performance-avoidance goal focused on the avoidance of normative incompetence. The 2 × 2 achievement goal framework is the most recent modification of the achievement goal theory, where the approach-avoidance distinction is made for both mastery and performance goals (see Elliot, 2005 for a review). In this study, however, we only focus on the mastery-approach and performance-approach goals which we shall subsequently refer to as mastery and performance goals.

2.2. Individual differences as antecedents of achievement goals

Individual differences have been implicated as important antecedents of achievement goals (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). Recent research has given special attention to how individual differences in the preference to master the task (which we call trait mastery) and the desire to compete with others (which we call trait competitiveness) predicted the adoption of mastery and performance goals. Harackiewicz et al. (1997, 1998), Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, et al. (2002) and Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, et al. (2002) studies have consistently shown that mastery goals were predicted by trait mastery only. Performance goals, on the other hand, were predicted by trait competitiveness. More recent research on the relationships of

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