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# Goal orientation and achievement: the role of ability self-concept and failure perception

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## Abstract

The prediction is tested that performance goals only entail poor achievement outcomes in individuals with a low self-concept of ability (American Psychologist, 41 (1986) 1040; Psychological Review, 95 (1988) 256). In agreement with Dweck, in three experimental studies participants with performance goals showed impaired performance only when their self-perceived ability was low. Contradictory to Dweck's predictions, in study 2 this was true although participants were not confronted with failure feedback. Finally, study 3 indicated that individuals with low self-perceived ability considered their performance more often as failures when directed towards performance goals. The consideration of self-perceived ability might clarify and help resolve contradicting research findings about effects of motivational orientation on achievement.

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## 1. Importance of goal orientation for achievement

Two different motivational orientations, towards learning and performance goals, have become important in educational and instructional psychology. Several researchers have proposed similar motivational dichotomies (Ames, 1984; Dweck,

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1986; Nicholls, 1984), which distinguish between the aim to increase one's competence (learning goal) and the aim to demonstrate high or to avoid demonstrating low competence (performance goal). These motivational concepts has proven to be extremely valuable in explaining adaptive or maladaptive cognitions, affects, and behavior in achievement situations. For example, individuals pursuing learning goals compared to those pursuing performance goals more often attribute achievement outcomes to effort rather than ability (Ames, 1984), have stronger positive affects towards achievement tasks (Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985) and report more active cognitive engagement as well as intrinsic motivation (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988). In terms of behavior, learning goals are associated with a more frequent use of adequate strategies including deep information processing and persistence (Ames & Archer, 1988; Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993; Nolen, 1988), as well as more frequent seeking for help (Butler & Neuman, 1995) in the face of difficulties. Although these patterns suggest that learning goals will be associated with better achievement outcomes than performance goals, research findings are far from unanimous.

### *1.1. Effects of goal orientation on achievement*

A meta-analysis of experimental studies examining effects of motivational states on performance (Utman, 1997) yielded a moderate advantage for learning goals over performance goals. Especially noteworthy is the highly significant heterogeneity of the effect sizes under scrutiny: whereas most studies yielded a learning goal advantage, others showed no significant effect or even presented performance goal advantages. Utman (1997) concluded that these differences indicated the influence of moderator variables.

Non-experimental studies examining associations between goal orientation and achievement have reported similarly diverse findings. Some studies presented positive correlations between learning goals and achievement indices such as grades and achievement tests (Greene & Miller, 1996; Meece & Holt, 1993; Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996; Spence & Helmreich, 1983), whereas others have reported insignificant correlations (Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988; Skaalvik, 1997). Evidence of a weak negative relationship between performance goals and achievement was found in most studies (Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988; Spence & Helmreich, 1983), although positive associations have also been reported (Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran & Nichols, 1996).

In reaction to these unclear research findings, it was recently proposed that learning goals might not at all be systematically associated with achievement. Instead, a further distinction of performance goals into approach and avoidance performance goals may better account for achievement differences: Whereas performance–approach goals (i.e. demonstrating high ability) should be associated with good performance results, performance-avoidance goals (i.e. avoiding to demonstrate low ability) should lead to poor performance (Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998).

In summary, research on learning and performance goals has not shown that motiv-

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