

Re-conceptualizing achievement goals from a cultural perspective

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Abstract

Past studies on achievement goals showed that mastery and performance goals would have distinguished effects on both learning processes and outcomes. Recent studies in the field have begun to explore these goals within different learning contexts. One important contextual consideration is how cultural influences affect the operation of achievement goals. While achievement goals can still be considered as individual's cognitive purposes for learning and achievement, these cognitions within a specific cultural context are exposed continually to the impact of different cultural values, beliefs and practices. This paper argues that achievement goals can be recast as a cultural construction solidified after internalization of cultural values at the individual level. To forge a cultural re-configuration of achievement goals and their effects, I first reviewed research on achievement goals among Asian students, mainly from different Chinese societies, highlighting some notable cultural differences in findings. I then proposed a model showing how both mastery goals and different forms of performance goals interact within a complex goal network among Chinese students. It is argued that achievement goals not only provide these students with a personal sense of purposes for learning, they also help them adjust effectively to sociocultural norms or demands related to learning and achievement.

Achievement goal theory

Achievement goals, defined as students' perceived purposes for learning will run off "a different 'program' with different commands, decision rules, and influence rules, and hence, with different cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences. Each goal, in a sense, creates and organizes its own world—each evoking different thoughts and emotions and calling forth different behaviors" (Elliott and Dweck, 1988, p.11). Over the past two decades, achievement goal theory has played a dominant role in the study of motivation and learning. Two contrasting categories of achievement goals, mastery and performance goals, have been widely investigated. Research results consistently corroborate that they are associated with different cognitive and motivational patterns. Mastery goals will orient students towards developing their ability and focusing on gaining comprehension, mastery and skill improvement. Performance goals will orient students towards demonstrating their ability and focusing on gaining positive evaluation of their ability or avoiding negative evaluation. Empirical studies have demonstrated that mastery goals are associated with more adaptive pattern of engagement, characterizing by the use of learning or cognitive strategies that lead to deeper levels of understanding and better performance (e.g. Newman, 1998; Pintrich, 1989; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Ryan, Gheen & Midgley, 1998). In contrast, performance goals are often associated with maladaptive patterns of learning such as the use of surface strategies and relatively poor results (e.g. Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the maladaptive effects of performance goals should be confined to avoidance orientation. In other words, when orienting towards demonstrating ability or striving for good grades, performance goals should have adaptive functions (Harackiewicz & et al., 1998; Midgley, Kaplan & Middleton, 2001). Increasingly, more empirical findings lending support to the adaptive nature of performance goals have been reported. For example, when concluding the results of a longitudinal study on the effects of achievement goals, Pintrich (2000) succinctly stated, "when coupled with mastery goals, approach performance goals are just as adaptive".

Justifications for reconceptualising achievement goals

Early goal researchers tended to characterize achievement goals as personal dispositions (e.g. Dweck, 1986). More recently, however, researchers have conceptualized achievement goals as context-bounded constructs, highlighting the overwhelming importance of various contextual variables in affecting the salience of a specific achievement goal (e.g. Ames, 1992; Meece et al., 1988). One of the important contextual considerations is how cultural influences affect the operation of achievement goals. Past studies on achievement goals are mainly conducted with Caucasian participants in Euro-American countries. The findings and the conceptualization of achievement goals are understood as individual differences within an individualistic cultural frame. The social dimension of learning and achievement prevalent in the collectivistic cultures has seldom been considered fully (McInerney, 1995).

Asian studies on achievement goals (Chen, 2001; Kong & Hau, 1996; Ng, 2000; Ng, 2001; Ng & Renshaw, 2002; Salili, Chiu & Lai, 2001; Shi & et al., 2001; Tao & Hong, 2000; Yamauchi & Miki, 2000 & 2003; Yip, 1992) have found converging results validating the applicability of the achievement goal concept among different Asian groups in Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. These studies also concurred with western research supporting the differential effects between mastery and different forms of performance goals. However, compared with western findings, there are some notable differences in the results of Asian studies that merit our attention and prompt the need to reconceptualise achievement goals from a cultural perspective:

1. Mastery and performance goals are always positively correlated (e.g. Chen, 2001; Eaton & Dembo, 1997; Hong & Tao, 2000; Ng, 2000; Salili, Chiu & Lai, 2001; Xiang, Lee & Solmon, 1997). This finding has not been explained clearly or further elaborated. Early conceptualization in the western studies generally considered these two goals as not related. Most of the subsequent studies showed that these two goals were unrelated, negatively related or nonsignificantly related.
2. Asian students tend to have higher scores in social goals (e.g. Ng, 2001).
3. Asian students tend to score higher in performance goals but lower in mastery goals compared with western students (e.g. Salili, Chiu, Lai 2001; Ng & Renshaw, 2002).

This paper argues that the operation and the effects of achievement goals when applying to students from different cultures should take into consideration the effects of cultural values, norms and practices (c.f. Trueba, 1988). As Salili (1997) argued, 'cultural values mediate achievement cognitions and behaviors and that achievement will mean different things and be manifested in different ways in people of different cultures or circumstances' (p.73). The notable differences highlighted can be attributed to the collectivistic cultures and their associated schooling practices in these Asian societies. In the following section, the cultural characteristics of the Chinese are first described, which form the cultural base for reconceptualising achievement goals in the proposed model that follows.

Chinese cultural values, norms and practices

Education is considered to be extremely important for the Chinese. Chinese parents hold high expectations and standards for academic achievement for their children. Their concerns focus more on children's relative performance than on how much or how well their children have learnt. They generally believe that educational achievement is the means for better career prospects and financial rewards (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). As a result they usually spend a lot of time on supervising their children's homework and seeking extra tutorial help in order that their children remain competitive in the class.

Shek & Chan (1999) found that Chinese parents considered an ideal Chinese child should first show filial piety to their parents and have good academic achievement. Seeking academic achievement can then be understood as one of the most important culturally

appropriate ways for showing filial piety and bringing glory to one's family (Salili, 1995). In other words, learning and achievement fulfill some significant social obligations in Chinese societies.

These cultural values beget corresponding practices in schools. Teachers generally put more emphasis on following model answers, getting high marks and good examination results. Their teaching focuses on boosting performance for high achieving students and avoiding failures for low-achieving ones. A large quantity of homework, high frequency of assessment, and an examination driven curriculum are common practices found in schools in Chinese societies like Hong Kong and Singapore. Students are therefore trained to use different adaptive strategies that help them survive keen competition and high pressure for achievement. These strategies include cueing for hints on examination questions, surface learning, high level of effort expenditure and delayed gratification.

It is therefore argued that these cultural values, norms and practices will probably lead to the development of the instrumentality of schooling. First, learning cannot be separated from achievement. In fact learning is carried out in order to get high achievement, which may include getting good grades in schools, developing a good career, and leading a better life. Second, learning and achievement are social obligations, which include mainly showing filial piety, being responsible and bringing glory to one's family; to achieve means to fulfill these obligations, and to learn hard continuously is to show that one is striving to comply with these obligations.

Translated to achievement goals, these cultural influences will definitely result in the continuous emphasis on performance goals. For achieving students, the focus will be on how to outperform other with effort; for low achieving ones, their main concern is not to show their low abilities, yet maintain continually a high level of effort expenditure in order to avoid further social sanction such as being labelled as lazy. In addition, there is a need to further distinguish between outperforming others and getting good grades. Getting good grades, to a great extent, satisfy the cultural demand for achievement. However, if such good grades fail to put students among the top ranks in the class, the high expectation for relative performance is still not yet met. Wanting to outperform others is therefore a more fundamental concern within the Chinese societies. In other words, performance goals can be considered as the ends in themselves. Outperforming others will gradually become more significant as the learning environment turns to be more competitive when students progress up the school levels.

Mastery goals are seldom valued for their own sake within a competitive schooling system. In other words, learning for the sake of personal interest, enjoyment and improvement are not as valued as learning for high achievement. Mastery goals therefore are not treasured so much as the ends as suggested in the western literature. These goals are often taken as the means for high achievement.

To sum up, while achievement goals among the Chinese can still be defined as individual perceived purposes for learning, such cognitions should be understood within the Chinese sociocultural context, taking into account of the impact of values, norms and practices.

Without such consideration, we may be misguided by the western research and motivate the Chinese in a culturally inappropriate manner, for example promoting mastery goals over performance goals and ignoring the potentials of social goals. In the following section, a model is proposed to reconceptualise the complex links between mastery, performance and social goals within the Chinese cultural system.

Proposed model: Classic conceptualization

The classic conceptualization is based on the instrumental nature of learning and achievement in Chinese societies discussed above. Learning is understood as a means for high achievement; therefore, the reason why Chinese students want to master certain knowledge, improve their abilities, and develop understanding is because these mastery goals will be instrumental in getting high achievement and outperforming others. Mastery and performance goals are then causally linked. Mastery goals become a means to an end, and in reverse, performance goals are the ends on their own.

Social concerns like showing filial piety and bringing glory to the family will make certain social goals such as social responsibility goals and social approval goals salient among Chinese students. These social goals are more fundamental motives for learning and achievement, and should have potentials to enhance the positive effects of mastery and performance goals. However, the effects of these goals on learning may be mediated through mastery and performance goals. Mastery and performance goals can be taken as strategic goals that will have immediate effects on how and why students learn. Social goals can be taken as supporting motivation. In other words, strategic goals related to mastery and performance concerns and social goals should be treated as goals operating at different levels. Finally, this classic conceptualization is in line with the notable differences found in Asian studies on achievement goals discussed earlier.

Proposed model: Differentiated conceptualization

A differentiated conceptualization holds that Chinese students will be able to separate clearly what is expected of them culturally and what they want to do for themselves. This conceptualization resembles the western understanding of achievement goals as individual pursuits. In this case students still endorse performance goals in order to fulfill the social obligations and demands for high achievement. Simultaneously, they hold different mastery goals as individual pursuits for knowledge, interest and enjoyment derived from learning. In this sense, achievement goals serve both individual concerns and social demands. Students are flexible cultural beings and will be able to deal with the social demands effectively and accommodate their own pursuits skillfully. In this differentiated conceptualization, mastery goals will function similarly as demonstrated in western studies and are adopted by Chinese students in their own right. The social obligations are fulfilled through performance goals. In contrast to the classic conceptualization, the differentiated perspective does not assume the existence of a causal relationship between mastery and performance goals. Following this line of argument,

students holding a differentiated conceptualization will probably link social responsibility and social approval goals more with performance goals than with mastery goals.

Relevant empirical evidence supporting the differentiated conceptualization can be found in Chang, Wong, Teo (2000), Tao & Hong (2000) and Liang, Gue, Zhang (1998). Based on Yu's theorization about Chinese motivation (1991, 1994), these studies showed that Chinese students' mastery goals were correlated positively individual-oriented achievement motivation, whereas performance goals were correlated positively with social-oriented achievement motivation. However, as these studies involved older students like undergraduates, it is not known if such a form of linkage between achievement goals and social- and individual-oriented achievement motivation will be held among primary students and young children.

Conclusion

These Chinese conceptualizations of achievement goals need to be tested. In testing these models, one of the crucial steps is to investigate Chinese students' conceptions of the relationship between achievement and learning and classify them into different groups holding classic and differentiated conceptualizations. In addition, there may be gender and age effects. Female and younger students will be more likely to hold a classic conceptualization while male and older students will be more likely to endorse a differentiated position. In other words, gender and age may interact with each other in affecting Chinese students' conceptions of achievement and learning.

In addition, it is important to ascertain how well one has been socialized into this collectivistic pattern of cultural understanding of schooling. Without this vital piece, we shall not be able to understand the complex relationship between mastery, performance and social goals in the puzzle of Chinese motivation and learning, nor will we be able to evaluate the relative importance of these goals. Researching the motivation of Chinese students therefore needs to pay special attention to this cultural understanding of learning and should not consider achievement goals at individual level per se. In short, the Chinese conceptualizations of achievement goals discussed here highlight the significant cultural influences on motivation and learning, and therefore, it is vital that studies based on western theories or concepts, such as achievement goals, should be scrutinized in light of cultural values, norms and practices prevalent among members of specific cultural groups.

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