Goal Theorists Should Move on From Performance Goals

Jere Brophy
College of Education
Michigan State University

The large body of goal theory research that has induced performance goals or included them on forced-choice questionnaires has produced coherent results. However, the few studies available on the matter suggest that students rarely generate performance goals spontaneously, if performance goals are defined in normative terms (i.e., outperforming peers). Furthermore, although students may need something more or different from mastery goals to help them mobilize to succeed in certain achievement situations, concerns about peer comparisons or competition are likely to distract them from a focus on doing what is necessary to get ready for the test. Finally, evidence is emerging that students disposed toward performance-approach goal orientations in the present are at risk for shifting to performance-avoidance goal orientations in the future and that students’ responses to performance-approach goal scales are more reflective of their past achievement histories in the domain than of motivational states likely to exert forward effects on subsequent achievement. Therefore, rather than characterize potentially productive nonmastery goals as performance-approach goals (which connotes social comparisons), goal theorists should characterize them as outcome goals or use other terms that emphasize achievement but not competition. In particular, they should avoid suggesting that teachers should encourage performance-approach goals that involve peer comparisons.

Achievement goal theorists construe motivation in education with reference to the qualitative purposes or goal orientations with which students engage in learning activities. Early goal theory work simply contrasted mastery and performance goal orientations, but more recent work has incorporated the approach-avoidance dimension to identify four principal goal orientations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 1999). Students with mastery-approach goal orientations focus on increasing their levels of competence by acquiring the knowledge or skills that the task develops. Students with mastery-avoidance orientations share an emphasis on mastery, but engage in the task with emphasis on avoiding mistakes, failures, or diminution of existing skills. Students with performance-approach orientations want to demonstrate their ability relative to others by outperforming them and publicly displaying their task-relevant knowledge or skills. Finally, students with performance-avoidance orientations also focus more on public display of competence than on developing new knowledge or skills, but rather than seeking to best their peers, they seek to avoid looking incompetent or less able to handle the task successfully.

Goal theory researchers generally agree that mastery goals are more productive than performance goals and approach goals are more productive than avoidance goals. However, a controversy has arisen about whether performance-approach goals should be considered productive, at least in some circumstances, and thus recommended to teachers as desirable complements to mastery-approach goals. Attempts to address this issue are complicated by differences in the ways that different investigators have induced or measured performance-approach goals, particularly in the degree to which they oriented students toward comparing themselves with their peers. Citing both philosophical concerns and several lines of empirical work, this article argues that instead of continuing to expand the definition of performance goals, goal theorists ought to phase out the term and categorize goals somewhat differently, perhaps contrasting mastery goals most directly with goals of validating one’s ability (Grant & Dweck, 2003), and treating the presence or absence of social comparisons as a secondary issue.

Correspondence should be addressed to Jere Brophy, College of Education, Michigan State University, 213B Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824. E-mail: jereb@msu.edu
NEED FOR CONCERN ABOUT EXTERNAL VALIDITY WHEN INFERRING IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FROM EXPERIMENTS AND QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

I am concerned about this because, as someone who frequently synthesizes psychology-based research for teachers, I periodically encounter situations where external validity limitations require careful qualification when drawing classroom implications from experimental findings. For example, the expectancy induction procedures used in many 1970s experiments on the self-fulfilling prophecy effects of teacher expectations made teachers appear highly gullible: susceptible to biased information, prone to quickly develop rigid expectations and begin acting on them, and so on. However, studies of teachers talking about and interacting with the students in their own classrooms showed that the teachers’ expectations for the students’ achievement usually were held more loosely, developed more cumulatively, and quite realistically because they were based on the best available evidence (Brophy, 1983).

Another example can be seen in the development of attribution theory. Early work on attributions for success and failure in achievement situations highlighted the importance of dimensions such as the internality and controllability of the causes cited as explanations for one’s level of performance. This led to a focus on four potential explanations for success or failure that offered variation on the internality and controllability dimensions: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Although it was recognized that people also attribute success or failure to other causes (Weiner, 1979), most early attribution studies were experiments that led participants to attribute success or failure to ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck, either by building these causes into vignettes constructed as stimulus materials or by presenting questionnaires that required participants to choose within this set of four potential causal explanations for depicted events. This gave the impression that students typically pointed to ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck (or some combination of these causes) when asked to explain their successes or failures. When this work eventually led to attribution retraining programs for students struggling with self-efficacy or learned helplessness problems, the programs were designed to train the students to attribute their failures to insufficient effort rather than to insufficient ability.

However, classroom studies indicated that struggling students seldom spontaneously attributed their failures to insufficient effort, but often attributed them to insufficient information or strategy knowledge. Furthermore, the students’ attributions tended to be accurate: They usually were putting forth effort, but their effort was not paying off because they lacked key knowledge or were relying on ineffective strategies to address the task. Eventually this became clear, and instead of insulting and further depressing struggling students by questioning their effort, attribution retraining programs began to focus on attributions to insufficient information or strategy knowledge. Reference to effort would be omitted unless there was reason to question it (Robertson, 2000).

In each of these examples, early attempts to extrapolate to the classroom findings derived from experiments or questionnaire responses yielded misleading assumptions and counterproductive advice. I fear that a similar situation is developing regarding performance goals.

BACKGROUND

The early work on goal theory led to an apparent synthesis around the idea that learning goals are productive but performance goals are counterproductive. This simple generalization broke down as it became clear that goal theory would have to include the approach-avoidance distinction as well as the learning-performance distinction. With these distinctions in place, a new synthesis emerged around the multiple goals perspective, in which learners match their goals to the contingencies of situations and coordinate their goal striving so as to pursue multiple goals efficiently and minimize the likelihood that they will find themselves working at cross purposes. Presumably, they will pursue mastery goals (preferably mastery-approach goals) to the extent that they value the content and are taught in ways that encourage or at least allow deep processing strategies; they will pursue performance goals (preferably performance-approach goals) when an emphasis on competition and test preparation make this necessary to earn good grades; and they will coordinate these achievement agendas with social or other agendas so that they support or at least do not conflict with one another. For details and references relating to these developments, see Brophy (2004), Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, and Thrash (2002), or Wolters (2004).

The multiple goals perspective resolves some of the problems inherent in the earlier mastery versus performance goals perspective. However, it introduces some new problems of its own. For example, it emphasizes the value of goal coordination, in which students pursue multiple goals simultaneously, adjusting their relative emphasis to the affordances and constraints of the situation. In classrooms, students may want to pursue both mastery and performance achievement goals, as well as social goals such as pleasing parents and teachers and maintaining their social reputations and friendships (Wentzel, 1999). Coordinating their goal striving involves taking advantage of opportunities to pursue more than one goal simultaneously and trying to avoid getting caught in situations where the things they feel they must do to satisfy one goal will interfere with their attempts to satisfy another (Urdan, 1999). This can get complicated quickly. For one thing, investment in any goal implies commitments to whatever efforts are required to accomplish it, and this may be accompanied by worry about the consequences of failure to succeed in doing so (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). Also, some goals are much closer than others to individuals’
core values and developing interests, so they are assigned higher priorities (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

Goal coordination in classrooms is especially difficult for struggling students, because maintaining commitment to mastery goals requires them to work harder than their peers (Hong, 2001). Even then, their work may still result in reduced payoff (i.e., lower grades) if teachers grade on a curve or hold all students to identical high standards that make it difficult for struggling students to succeed (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001).

Other research also suggests that addressing multiple goals simultaneously is appealing in theory but difficult to accomplish in reality. In a study of people engaged in volunteer efforts, Kiviniemi, Snyder, and Omoto (2002) found that those who volunteered in response to a single motivation reported more positive experiences and fulfillment than those who reported that their volunteering was in the service of multiple motivations. Emmons and King (1988) showed that mobilizing to strive to accomplish particular goals involves focusing attention on what is relevant to accomplishing those goals and shutting out what is not relevant. More generally, the large body of research on working memory indicates that multiple demands on attention (such as those involved in simultaneous attempts to accomplish multiple and, especially, conflicting goals) tend to overload our cognitive resources and thus reduce our capacities for mobilizing to focus on any particular goal.

Another complication introduced by the multiple goals perspective is that, although it has generated evidence of the value (at least in the short term) of matching goals to learning situations, it has shifted the focus of debate to the value of the learning situations themselves. For example, it is now well established that, in certain situations (e.g., highly competitive college courses in which students are graded on a curve), a combination of mastery-approach goals and performance-approach goals is associated with a more desirable set of outcomes than is the presence of one of these goal orientations but not the other, because mastery-approach goal orientations are associated with desired motivational outcomes (enjoying the course, being interested in its content, wanting to take similar courses in the future) but not better course grades, whereas performance-approach goal orientations are associated with better course grades but not with better motivational outcomes (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002).

Goal theorists who favor a multiple goals perspective (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002) have interpreted these findings as favoring this perspective over earlier interpretations that depicted mastery goals as productive but performance goals as counterproductive. However, other goal theorists (e.g., Kaplan & Middleton, 2002) have suggested that motivational theorists ought to be criticizing such achievement contexts as undesirable rather than appearing to condone them by suggesting that performance-approach goals are sometimes productive. They argued that, instead of imposing curves to artificially limit access to high grades, instructors should use criterion-referenced grading that rewards individuals according to the levels of mastery they attain, independently of the levels attained by peers. I agree with this position but recognize that it reflects subjective values about the purposes and nature of schooling, so in the rest of this article, I will offer more research-based reasons for de-emphasizing performance goals (even performance-approach goals). I begin with issues rooted in the ways that performance goals have been defined and measured.

**PERFORMANCE-GOAL DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT ISSUES**

Although goal theorists use somewhat different language, they tend to agree in distinguishing mastery goals from performance goals by defining mastery goals as focusing on the development of competence or task mastery, but defining performance goals as focusing on the demonstration of competence relative to others (Elliot, 1999). However, this normative, comparison-to-others feature of the definition of performance goals is not always carried through to the procedures used to induce performance goals in experiments or the items used in questionnaires measuring performance goals in correlational studies. In experiments in which goal orientations were induced in the participants, the induction procedures often minimized the contrasts between mastery goals and performance goals. For example, in an experiment described by Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996), the following instructions were used to induce goal orientations in the mastery group and the performance-approach group:

*Mastery goal:* The purpose of this project is to collect data on college students' reactions to hidden figure puzzles—specifically, our Nina puzzles … when you have completed the four puzzles, you will be provided with information regarding the percentage of the total hidden Ninas that you found in today's session.

*Performance-approach goal:* The purpose of this project is to compare college students to one another in their ability to solve hidden figure puzzles—specifically, our Nina puzzles. In our previous work, we have found that most (university) students are fairly comparable in their ability to solve Nina puzzles, but some students stand out because they do quite well on the puzzles. This session will give you the opportunity to demonstrate that you are a good puzzle solver … when you have completed the four puzzles, you will be provided with information regarding how you did compared to other (university) students.

I would argue that these instructions minimize the differences between mastery and performance-approach goals. In the first place, mastery goals are only vaguely suggested. The
reference to students’ “reactions” to hidden figure puzzles is ambiguous (I think most students would take this to refer to what they thought of the puzzles or how much they enjoyed working on them, rather than how well they did on them), and the promised performance feedback seems vague (without some normative reference, what is one to make of information about the percentage of hidden figures found?). There is nothing in these instructions about learning anything from the experience or trying to develop one’s skills at solving hidden figure puzzles—it’s just “Try to find the hidden figures, and when you are done, we will tell you what percentage you found.” I submit that the relatively vague goal implied by these instructions could almost as easily be construed as a performance-approach goal (or more specifically, an outcome goal—see below) as a mastery goal.

The performance-approach induction corresponds better to typical definitions of performance-approach goals. However, one wonders about its impact. Given that their experimental participation is a one-shot, isolated experience, many students would likely view the task more as an amusement than a test of a fundamental ability, especially when the feedback is phrased with reference to vague norms rather than the performance of known peers.

In general, the performance goal induction procedures used both by Harackiewicz, Elliot, and their colleagues and by other investigators (Butler & Neuman, 1995; Erdley, Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997; McNeil & Alibali, 2000; VanYperen, 2003) primarily emphasized trying to do well. Competing against others was emphasized secondarily or not at all. Thus, the ostensible performance goal orientations that participants in these experiments generated in response to the induction procedures probably involved little if any of the social comparison or competition emphasis usually associated with performance goals.

This social comparison emphasis is typically more salient in the questionnaire items used in correlational studies. For example, Midgley and her colleagues developed the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS), which includes six performance-approach items: I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher’s questions in class; it’s important to me that the other students in my classes think that I am good at my work; I want to do better than the other students in my classes; I would feel successful in school if I did better than most of the students; I’d like to show my teachers that I’m smarter than the other students in my classes; and Doing better than other students in school is important to me (Midgley et al., 1998). Most of the research done by these investigators uses variations on this scale. Similarly, most of the research done by Harackiewicz, Elliot, and their colleagues uses variations on a six-item scale introduced by Elliot and Church (1997): It is important to me to do better than the other students, My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the students, I am striving to demonstrate my ability relative to others in this class, I am motivated by the thought of outperforming my peers, It is important to me to do well compared to others in this class, and I want to do well in this class to show my ability to my family, friends, advisors, or others.

Although most of the items used by these two groups of investigators mention peer comparisons directly, some of their items and some of the items used by other investigators stop short of that by referring only to doing well or demonstrating one’s ability. Even so, the questionnaires used in correlational studies usually incorporate peer comparisons more explicitly than the induction procedures used in experimental studies.

LOW BASE RATES OF PERFORMANCE GOALS

The vast majority of the research generated from goal theory has involved these experimental induction procedures or Likert-scale questionnaires. There is reason for concern about the external validity and generalizability of these measures. As Urden (2001) pointed out, participation in a laboratory experiment typically is a one-time experience, and one’s level of task performance carries little or no long-term consequence. In the classroom, however, students approach new activities and assignments within the context of their cumulative history of school experiences, and their performance levels have consequences for their grades. External validity is less of a concern when a study involves actual school activities and students’ goal orientations are measured with questionnaires, but even here, the questionnaires both suggest goal orientations that the students might not have generated on their own and limit the range of responses that students can offer to those defined by the researcher.

Assessing the external validity of goal theory’s core concepts requires assessing the degree to which people in achievement situations (most relevantly, students in schools) generate mastery and performance goals spontaneously prior to or during their engagement in achievement-related activity. In short, what do students say when asked to describe their goals in their own words? Remarkably, very few investigators have addressed this question. As the author of a textbook on motivation in education, I have been following the literature on motivation in general and on goal theory in particular for many years. Nevertheless, I had encountered only four studies that allowed students to express goal orientations in their own words. Two of these had been done in the 1980s by investigators who were not specifically addressing students’ goals, and the other two were done more recently by investigators whose work was informed by goal theory. These studies all raised questions about the degree to which students spontaneously generate and act on mastery and (especially) performance goal orientations in their everyday lives at school.

Investigators who did not focus specifically on goals but simply asked students about their work yielded little evi-
evidence of any goal-oriented thinking at all. Anderson, Brubaker, Alleman-Brooks, and Duffy (1985) asked first-graders about their literacy assignments and elicited mostly vague generalities such as “It’s just our work” or “We learn to read.” To the extent that students mentioned purposes or goals, low achievers talked mostly about finishing their assignments on time, whereas high achievers talked mostly about doing the work correctly. Similarly, Rohrkemper and Bershon (1984) interviewed elementary students about what was on their minds when they worked on assignments. They found that, of 49 students who gave codable responses, two were concerned only about getting finished, 45 were concerned about getting the answers correct, and only two mentioned trying to understand what was being taught. These studies yielded no suggestion of performance goals and only vague hints of mastery goals.

Two more recent studies that focused more directly on goals nevertheless yielded similar findings. Lemos (1996) interviewed Portuguese sixth-graders about the goals they pursued in their classrooms. She found that seven types of goals were mentioned frequently:

1. Working goals (29%): engaging in academic work in order to “get it done” or “finish it and go on to the next one.”
2. Evaluation goals (21%): working in order to garner positive evaluations or avoid negative ones.
3. Learning goals (19%): seeking to learn, to know more about, to find out how, and so on.
4. Complying goals (17%): seeking to meet student role requirements successfully by doing what the teacher says, following the rules, paying attention, and so on.
5. Interpersonal relationship goals (6%): seeking to develop positive relationships with teachers or peers.
6. Enjoyment goals (5%): engaging in activities for pleasure, enjoyment, or fun.
7. Discipline goals (3%): wanting to engage in ethical behavior and avoid getting into disciplinary trouble.

Note that, although mastery goals (called learning goals here) were represented, performance goals were not. The students who were coded for evaluation goals talked about getting good grades but not about displaying ability or looking good in comparison with their classmates.

Similarly, Urdan and his colleagues used a stimulated recall method with American elementary and middle school students, in which they showed the students selected excerpts from videos of recently occurring events in their own classrooms and elicited their perceptions regarding the purpose of trying to learn the material, the purposes of achievement, and related motivational thinking. They found that the students typically generated long-term, utility-value reasons (I need to learn this to get a good job, to get into college, etc.). They rarely mentioned either the inherent value of learning the material for the sake of knowing it or the goal of seeking to do better than others or demonstrate their ability relative to others (Urdan, 2001; Urdan, Kneisel, & Mason, 1999).

These findings suggest that, when allowed to describe their goals in their own words, students (or at least elementary and middle school students) seldom mention performance goals spontaneously. They may aspire to passing a test or getting a certain grade, but they rarely mention displaying ability or looking good in comparison with their classmates. Goal theorists and many other motivational researchers may find it difficult to accept this conclusion, because the dominance of experimental social psychology paradigms and especially the widespread use of Likert-scale measures of goal orientations have created the perception that students routinely generate performance goals that involve displaying ability by besting peers. The admittedly limited existing evidence does not support this conclusion.

In fact, I have found no evidence that does. In response to challenges by reviewers, I went back and looked again, conducting multiple searches of the ERIC and PsycINFO data bases, using search keywords and combinations that might lead to studies that allowed students to express goal orientations in their own words. I was unable to locate any additional studies. I also asked several goal theorists and other motivational researchers if they knew of any other work on the spontaneous generation of mastery or performance goals, and none did.

However, Monique Boekaerts of Belgium related in a personal communication that European investigators from several countries have reported little evidence of performance goals even when using typical Likert-scale measures. Furthermore, she herself found that Dutch students not only did not generate performance goals spontaneously but resisted adopting them when they were encouraged to do so (because they were strongly oriented toward learning through collaboration with peers rather than competing with them).

At this point, it seems reasonable to conclude that, under natural classroom conditions, performance goals are a low-incidence phenomenon. The induction procedures and questionnaire instruments commonly used by goal theorists appear to have good internal validity, because their research has produced a considerable body of coherent and replicated findings. However, certain aspects of these findings may reflect method variance rather than person variance. Limited but consistent evidence on spontaneous generation of goal orientations indicates that students do not ordinarily generate performance goals that include elements of peer comparison and competition.

This currently low natural incidence of performance goals is desirable from several perspectives, including not only much of goal theory but much of the theory and research that has developed in connection with concepts such as collaborative learning and learning community (which emphasize cooperation over competition as the desired classroom ethos). Therefore, even though the concept of performance-approach goals has proven useful in certain forms of goal the-
ory research, I would argue we ought not to be suggesting that teachers encourage their students to formulate performance-approach goals, if by this we mean achievement goals that include a peer comparison component. For the reasons already mentioned and for other reasons outlined below, I believe that both individual students and the class as a whole will be better off if they focus on individually or collaboratively attaining curricular goals rather than on competing with one another.

SOCIAL COMPARISON CONCERNS AS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE IN THE SHORT RUN

Proponents of the original goal theory typically suggest that teachers should minimize elements of competition and social comparison in the learning community norms and evaluation and reward structures operating in their classrooms, while at the same time encouraging students to adopt mastery goals and providing them with the instructional scaffolding and personal support needed to enable them to attain these goals successfully (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989). Proponents of the multiple goals typically agree but include an addendum to the effect that, in situations where competition cannot be entirely eliminated in favor of criterion-referenced grading, teachers should encourage performance-approach goals along with mastery-approach goals (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, et al., 2002).

I submit that there is no theoretical reason to believe that performance-approach goals featuring competitive, social comparison concerns would support students’ achievement striving any more effectively than relatively specific achievement goals phrased without reference to social comparisons (e.g., passing the test, getting an A, etc.). The levels of success that students achieve in acquiring intended learning outcomes by participating in lessons and working on assignments depend not only on their task-relevant abilities and levels of prior knowledge, but on the degree to which they make optimal use of available but finite resources such as task attention, working memory, and time investment. Allocations of the latter resources are subject to zero-sum, opportunity-cost constraints: Any attention, working memory, or time allocated to one agenda is no longer available for allocation to other agendas. Thus, to the extent that students’ motivation and related strategizing includes concerns about peer comparisons and competition, they will be distracted from an exclusive focus on learning the material and doing what they think they need to do to prepare for the test.

Goal theorists’ findings suggest that students sometimes do need something more or different from mastery goals and deep-level processing strategies to help them mobilize to do whatever is necessary to earn good grades. This may include rote memorizing, last-minute cramming, or other shallow processing strategies that are associated more with performance goals than mastery goals. However, this mobilization of resources is most likely to be successful when it focuses exclusively on doing what needs to be done to get the good grade. Time spent on other agendas is time lost from that agenda.

Several lines of research support logical arguments that distraction from a task focus toward peer competition is likely to be counterproductive. Studies of stereotype threat indicate that it has negative effects on test performance, and that these effects are mediated by social comparison concerns that reduce vulnerable individuals’ ability to sustain concentration on the test (Croizet et al., 2004; Schmader & Johns, 2003). A similar conclusion is suggested by goal theory studies indicating that a social comparison focus is not only cognitively distracting from task engagement but likely to be associated with anxiety, worry, and other negative emotions. To the extent that such emotions “invade” conscious awareness, they further reduce the resources that the student has available to bring to bear on the task. These problems are associated primarily with performance-avoidance goals rather than performance-approach goals. However, performance-approach goals may be undergirded by avoidance as well as approach concerns (Elliot & Church, 1997); students who express performance-approach goals are also likely to hold performance-avoidance goals (Midgley et al. 1998); and these students’ performance approach goals are likely to shift to performance-avoidance goals if they experience difficulties in meeting task demands (see next section).

PERFORMANCE-APPROACH GOAL ORIENTATIONS AS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE IN THE LONG RUN

Even before goal theory became formulated as such, Dweck (1986) warned against saying or doing anything that might orient students toward self-validation or social comparisons rather than meeting task demands and advancing their own learning trajectories, because this could open the door to what we now call performance-avoidance goals and ultimately to learned helplessness. Nicholls (1989) expressed similar concerns. More recently, Midgley, Kaplan, and Middleton (2001) also cautioned against encouraging performance-approach goals, fearing that this would reinforce students’ dispositions toward including social comparison components in their goal orientations. This might be beneficial (or at least, not harmful) in the short run or for as long as the students were successful in achieving those goals, but if their success rates began to drop as they moved into higher grades and encountered more challenging tasks, they would be at risk for shifting from performance-approach goals to performance-avoidance goals.

Middleton, Kaplan, and Midgley (2004) subsequently provided evidence that this hypothesized shift does in fact occur. They studied efficacy perceptions and goal orientations related to mathematics learning in students contacted
originally in sixth grade and followed up through seventh grade. They found that students who felt efficacious in mathematics but also expressed performance-approach goal orientations as sixth-graders were prone to shifting toward performance-avoidance goal orientations as seventh-graders.

Senko & Harackiewicz (2004) reported a similar shift in college students’ goal orientations measured early and then again later in the semester. Although there were general tendencies toward stability in these students’ goal orientations, there was also a tendency for students who emphasized performance-approach goals early in the semester to shift to performance-avoidance goals if they did poorly on midterm tests. Thus, it appears that any social comparison components to achievement goal orientations are potentially counterproductive, even if they are currently approach—rather than avoidance—oriented. Given that assignments become more difficult and challenging as students move through progressive levels of schooling, there is every reason to believe that more and more of those who begin to emphasize performance-approach goals will later shift to performance-avoidance goals as time passes. Thus, even for individual students for whom performance-approach goals appear to be productive in the short run, these ostensible short-run benefits are likely to be negated by eventual long-term costs.

Performance goals that emphasize social comparisons also can be seen as counterproductive from the teacher’s perspective. Such goals imply a selfish and competitive focus that conflicts with norms associated with concepts such as collaborative learning, learning community, or positive classroom climate. When this can lead to is exemplified by findings indicating that performance-goal oriented students are more elitist and self-centered than mastery-goal oriented students, being more oriented to social status and wanting to work on their own or collaborate only with in-group peers, rather than with the full range of their peers (Levy, Kaplan, & Patrick, 2004).

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PERFORMANCE-APPROACH GOALS AND ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES AS EPIPHENOMENA

Readers who have followed the argument so far nevertheless may resist its natural conclusion due to reservations rooted in an important practical question: Shouldn’t we continue to pay attention to performance-approach goals because they often correlate significantly with achievement measures, even when mastery goals do not? This is a good question, but it is premised on the assumption that adopting performance-approach goals enhances achievement outcomes (i.e., plays a causal role).

I believe that the evidence for a causal link between performance goal adoption and subsequent enhancement of achievement or other performance outcomes is weak to nonexistent, for two reasons. First, most of the experimental studies assessed motivational outcomes (e.g., increases in intrinsic motivation for the task) but not performance outcomes. Furthermore, when these studies did assess performance outcomes, their results did not support a causal role for performance goal adoption. As Van Yperen (2003), citing reviews by Barron and Harackiewicz (2001) and by Utman (1997), concluded, “in experimental achievement goal research, the link between assigned performance-approach goals and actual performance does not seem to exist” (p. 1010).

Second, the correlational relationships developed from questionnaire data seem unlikely to be causal. As Van Yperen (2003) noted, various studies have demonstrated that personally adopted performance-approach goals do show weak but positive (averaging about .20) correlations with actual performance (such as examination performance, semester grade point average, or course grade, controlled for initial performance using high school GPA or SAT scores). Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, et al. (2002) similarly reported positive but low regression coefficients in their review of 14 studies done at the college level. These studies used multiple regression, path analysis, or related statistical techniques that unfortunately employ causal language (e.g., mediation, effects), but nevertheless do not allow investigators to draw causal inferences from the correlational data. I believe that the correlations between performance-approach goal adoption (in response to Likert-scale items) and subsequent achievement outcomes found in these studies are unlikely to reflect causal linkages, and much more likely to be epiphenomena subsumed within a larger set of contrasts between higher and lower achievers, rooted in their histories as learners.

The items on performance-approach scales ask students to endorse goals of outperforming most (sometimes all) of their classmates. Endorsement of such items is realistic only for higher achievers whose past histories of success on similar tasks make it reasonable for them to expect to do better than most of their peers. In contrast, average and especially low achievers, if they have accurate perceptions of their achievement histories and are responding to the questionnaire conscientiously, are likely to circle scale numbers close to the “strongly disagree” or “not at all true of me” end of the scale, rather than the “strongly agree” or “very true of me” end of the scale, when confronted with items such as “My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the students.” Thus, it is likely that correlations between questionnaire measures of performance-approach goals and measures of student achievement reflect the effects of past achievement histories on students’ current willingness to endorse optimistic goals when filling out the questionnaires, rather than any causal effects of endorsing performance-approach goals on subsequent achievement, especially when the achievement measure reflects significant achievement over an extended time period (e.g., course grades, GPA).

I am not the first to point this out. Elliot and Church (1997) identified perceived competence as a probable precur-
sor to goal adoption and posited that individuals high in perceived competence would be likely to adopt approach goals whereas individuals low in perceived competence would be likely to adopt avoidance goals. Van Yperen (2003) concluded from his data that adoption of a performance-approach goal is more likely to reflect a history of success in similar prior achievement situations than to play a causal role in determining the success achieved in subsequent situations. Thus, this interpretation of performance goal adoption as epiphenomenal rather than causal is not new, but even goal theorists who have already accepted it have not drawn the logical conclusion concerning implications for teacher education. I believe that, in addition to all of the other reasons to avoid encouraging normative performance goals, there are reasons to suspect that the positive correlations linking performance-approach goals to achievement measures are epiphenomenal rather than causal. Performance-approach goals (as measured) are more likely responses to and reflections of prior achievement history in the domain than causal mechanisms affecting subsequent achievement.

CONCLUSION

My purpose in developing this argument has not been to critique goal theory as such or suggest that it is invalid or useless. On the contrary, I am appreciative of its many accomplishments (see chapter 4 in Brophy, 2004, for details). I do think that goal theorists need to become more conscious of external validity issues, however, and to take particular care in formulating comments to teachers and teacher educators about the practical implications of their findings.

I also do not intend to suggest that everything about goal theory (or any other theory) must relate to high incidence events or have strong relevance to practice. A validated theory that explains many high incidence events is most useful to practitioners, of course, but a validated theory that in addition or instead explains some relevant low incidence events is useful as well. In moving back and forth between theory and practice, however, it is important to know about and bear in mind the natural rates of occurrence of the events addressed. I have argued here that performance-approach goals are low incidence events in natural classroom situations and that, although goal theory research has established that performance goal adoption is positively associated with subsequent task performance, these relationships are correlational and likely to be epiphenomenal rather than causal. These and other concerns suggest caution about encouraging teachers to say or do anything that might foster performance goals, even performance approach goals, in their students.

One potential way of addressing this problem is to differentiate the concept of performance goals by distinguishing between subtypes. Grant and Dweck (2003), for example, identified three types of performance goal orientations: outcome goals that are simply focused on obtaining positive outcomes (do well in my courses, get good grades), ability goals that are linked to validating one’s ability (confirm my intelligence through my school work, demonstrate my intellectual ability), and normative goals that include social comparisons (do better in my classes than other students, confirm that I am more intelligent than other students). Factor analyses indicated that these three types of goals were empirically as well as conceptually distinct, and other analyses indicated that they had contrasting patterns of correlation with other motivational variables and learning strategy variables.

Grant and Dweck’s distinctions may not map onto the present argument directly, for two reasons. First, their goal assessment items focused on very general goal orientations, whereas many studies of achievement goals used items that were specific to the task at hand or the course that the student was taking. Second, given the wording of their items and the findings reported previously on low base rates of performance goals, I suspect that not only normative goals but also ability goals are not often generated spontaneously by students in classrooms.

Nevertheless, Grant and Dweck’s goal distinctions and related findings suggest that one way to bring better clarity to recent controversies concerning performance goals is to distinguish between performance goals that include a social comparison component (normative goals) and performance goals that do not (ability goals, outcome goals). There is no problem with this from a theoretical perspective, but I would argue from a practical application perspective that this solution is not ideal. The social comparison component has been emphasized in most measures of performance goals, and a great deal of confusion is likely to arise if the same term is used in different ways. I believe that some other solution is needed.

One possibility would be to reserve the term performance goal for goals that include a social comparison component (Grant and Dweck’s normative goals). However, this would leave out Grant and Dweck’s ability goals, which also incorporate part of the original definition of performance goals (the part that deals with validating one’s ability).

Another, and I believe better, potential solution is to phase out the term performance goals altogether. Following Grant and Dweck (2003), we might start distinguishing between learning–mastery goals and validation goals. Subtypes of validation goals would include ability goals (validating one’s ability by doing well on tests or other assessment criteria) and normative goals (validating one’s ability by outperforming peers). Outcome goals would be a separate type, differing from learning/mastery goals in that they focus more on successfully meeting assessment criteria than on learning, but also differing from validation goals because the learner does not view the assessment as a test of, opportunity to display, or other potential validation of ability. Outcome goals appear to have more in common with what other investigators have called extrinsic or evaluation goals: wanting to do well on the assessment not only because this would indicate mastery but
because test performance is associated with potential rewards or punishments such as parental approval or disapproval, subsequent educational and occupational opportunities, and so on (Pintrich, 1999; Urday, 1997).

In conclusion, theory, research, and concerns about avoiding counterproductive advice to teachers suggest that, although goals other than mastery goals may be needed to help students mobilize to do what needs to be done to succeed in certain achievement situations, these goals should be described as outcome goals or some other term that does not carry the social comparison connotation carried by the term performance goals (e.g., success goals, criterion goals, extrinsic goals, utility goals, or evaluation goals). Outcome goals characterize the target attainment in criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced (peer comparison) terms, and they orient students toward achievement rather than competition. Like the shift from a focus on effort to a focus on strategies in discussing failure attributions, this point needs emphasis not just as a matter of theoretical tightening but as a way to minimize the danger of drawing counterproductive implications for teachers from goal theory research.

REFERENCES


