

Should Childhood Be a Journey or a Race? Response to Harackiewicz et al. (2002)

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In this response, the authors dispel interpretation of their critical review of research on performance-approach goals as support for a dichotomous perspective of achievement goal theory. Second, the authors challenge the suggestion that accepting recent research findings and adopting a multiple goals perspective constitutes a *theoretical revision* of the assumption that "mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always bad" (J. M. Harackiewicz, K. E. Barron, P. R. Pintrich, P. R. Elliot, & T. M. Thrash, 2002, p. 643). The authors make a distinction between developments that contribute to the explanatory power of the theory and value-laden interpretations of theory and research. The authors argue that phrasing the latter in terms of the former is misleading and that it masks the necessity for a critical discussion over the desired purposes in different types of achievement contexts.

In a recent article, we, together with Carol Midgley¹ (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001), raised questions concerning what we interpreted as a call by several researchers to revise achievement goal theory so as to position performance-approach goals alongside mastery goals as a valued and desired motivational orientation. To summarize briefly, in that article we reviewed research, conducted by several researchers including ourselves, that indeed showed that performance-approach goals are associated with positive outcomes such as grades and academic efficacy. However, we also pointed to the need for further research to be conducted before a sweeping statement could be made that these goals are adaptive, not to mention desirable. Specifically, we noted that research seems to suggest that (a) performance-approach goals may be associated with certain types of positive outcomes such as achievement but not with other types such as meaningful learning and retention; (b) performance-approach goals may be associated with positive outcomes among students with certain characteristics such as older students with high ability but not necessarily among other students; (c) performance-approach goals may be associated with positive outcomes in certain contexts such as competitive learning environments but not in other contexts; and (d) there may be costs associated with adopting performance-approach goals, most important, the risk for adoption of performance-avoidance goals when environmental conditions change. Finally, we concluded that we did not think that achievement goal theory should be revised. Specifically, we noted that the research that shows that

performance goals may be adaptive for certain students in certain circumstances as long as mastery goals are also high . . . should not be interpreted as proof that it is facilitative for students to be oriented *primarily* [italics added] to demonstrating their ability or facilitative for schools to emphasize relative ability and competition among students without emphasizing mastery goals. (Midgley et al., 2001, p. 83)

We emphasized that our major concern was that if the understanding that performance-approach goals are sometimes adaptive was labeled a revision of the theory, it might result in neglecting to emphasize mastery goals.

Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, and Thrash (2002) have written a thoughtful and insightful response to our article. Their article took issue with several of the points that we presented. Arguably, three points are most important in their argument. First, Harackiewicz et al. reported on new research that found associations between performance-approach goals and additional positive outcomes such as task value and effort. Moreover, the new findings suggested that in certain contexts, the positive outcomes associated with performance-approach goals—particularly grades—may be independent from the positive outcomes associated with mastery goals. Second, Harackiewicz et al. argued that researchers should adopt a multiple-goals perspective when conceptualizing achievement motivation and that, in their view, the most adaptive motivational orientation is that which combines high mastery goals and high performance-approach goals. And third, the authors contended that the adoption of such a multiple-goals perspective constitutes the revision of achievement goal theory to which we objected in our article.

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The main title of this article is a paraphrase of a bumper sticker quoted in Johnston and Ross (2001).

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¹ On November 23, 2001, Carol Midgley, a mentor, colleague, and friend, passed away. We see this exchange among researchers—conducted in the spirit of collaboration and aiming to enhance understanding and facilitation of adaptive educational processes—to be a tribute to her scholarship.

We welcome this response by Harackiewicz et al. (2002). We see this kind of exchange as the essential practice of academia, and we hope for further opportunities to discuss these issues in a way that will advance theory and research. In the present response to their article, we would like to make several brief comments to clarify our perspective, perhaps dispel some misunderstandings, and advance the discussion.

In their article, Harackiewicz et al. (2002) noted that they agree with much of what we had written. We find ourselves in a similar position. Indeed, given our emphasis on the need to explore further the operation of achievement goals with different outcomes, in different contexts, and among students of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and ability, we find much interest in the recent findings that Harackiewicz et al. reported, as much of it focuses exactly on these issues. Furthermore, we agree with the lines of research findings that they presented in their article. We agree that the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is meaningful when considering the situated performance goals that people adopt. We also accept that, under certain conditions, adoption of performance-approach goals may be associated with outcomes defined as adaptive. Finally, we agree that understanding motivational orientations as involving multiple goals represents a more complex and advanced perspective over one that treats mastery and performance goals as a dichotomy. This last point may seem surprising to some, as Harackiewicz et al. continuously referred to our article as supporting what they term *normative* goal theory, a term that seems to refer to a treatment of mastery and performance goals as a dichotomy and to the belief that "mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always bad" (Harackiewicz et al., 2002, p. 643). Actually, we never use this terminology or make such claims. Yet, even though it may still seem puzzling, whereas we endorse as illuminating the theoretical developments that Harackiewicz et al. described, nevertheless we do not support their call for a revision of achievement goal theory.

In supporting our position, we might argue that the theoretical developments that Harackiewicz et al. (2002) described already have their roots in earlier formulations of achievement goal theory and that none of these developments involves a fundamental revision of underlying theoretical assumptions. However, this argument against the revision of the theory could be thought of as relying on semantics, and the apparent disagreement between the two approaches may seem petty. Indeed, we perceive the important differences in the positions regarding the revision of achievement goal theory to lie elsewhere. Specifically, the discrepancy between our agreement over research findings and our disagreements about the meaning of these findings to the value-laden "bottom-line" of the theory may be grounded in somewhat different ideologies concerning social science, particularly when theory and research concern applied domains such as education.

Rather than speculate over the perspective held by Harackiewicz et al. (2002), we will present our perspective and describe how it provides grounds for opposing the type of revision that they suggested. We argue that achievement goal theory is a conceptual tool that can be used for understanding motivational processes in achievement contexts. The strength of the theory is in its explanatory power, and the task of researchers is to enhance this explanatory power through high quality empirical research that would lead to developments and changes in the theory. Yet, even the most powerful theory does not provide a basis in itself for judgments of

value. These decisions are to be made by those who evaluate the theory and research findings in light of their own purposes and definitions of what is adaptive and desirable. Granted, researchers and theorists are among those who have purposes and values and who engage in the definition of what is desired.² Indeed, a point that can legitimately be raised is that the distinction between the theoretical processes that operate in achievement contexts and the value that is attached to these processes have not been clear in achievement goal theory. We believe that this distinction needs to be made explicit. It seems to us that although the exchange that is taking place between Harackiewicz et al. and us has been phrased in terms of the former, it is actually about the latter.

For example, Harackiewicz et al. (2002) said that the multiple-goals perspective "offers the potential for a better and more sophisticated understanding of the complex phenomena of motivation, learning, and achievement" (p. 643). We agree wholeheartedly. However, this sentence of theirs appears as the logical extension of the criticism of the simplistic generalization that mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always bad" (Harackiewicz et al., 2002, p. 643). We may agree or disagree with this criticism, and indeed we believe that such a debate is most important. The relevant point to the present exchange, however, is that the terms of this discussion are different from those concerning the explanatory power of the theory. This is mainly because the simplistic statement "mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always bad" is not an inherent underlying assumption of achievement goal theory. Rather, it is a value that is based on the type of success that one believes should be emphasized in the achievement context. Nicholls (1989), for example, saw it as an ethical issue:

I can argue that ego orientation [performance goals] and academic alienation are unfortunate and cynical approaches to academic life. But I can hardly argue that these orientations are false, unbiased, or not objective. Instead, I argue that these unfortunate realities are more pervasive because people who are highly competitive or alienated claim that impressing the "right" people and beating others is the way to success. (pp. 101-103)

Urdan (1997) agreed and suggested that the positive associations of performance goals with outcomes

may be due more to the way schools are than the way they could be. Task [mastery] goals represent a hope that all students, not just those who think they are more able than others or those that enjoy beating others, can become actively involved in school and be motivated to learn for the sake of learning. (p. 136)

From this perspective, for example, instead of interpreting the finding that performance-approach goals contribute to achievement whereas mastery goals contribute to interest as indicating that

² Theory building, in general, but particularly in the social sciences, represents a tension between the empirical search for facts and the realization that this search itself and the interpretation of its findings to theory are aspects of a value-laden sociocultural process of construction of facts. Researchers affect the values associated with theoretical processes through various ways that include the specification of underlying assumptions, selection of research questions, the use of certain methods, and the interpretations of research findings. Although relevant to our present discussion, this inevitable process is not the focus of the response.

the most desirable motivational orientation is high performance approach—high mastery, one might question the educational characteristics of a context in which a focus on mastering and understanding the material does not contribute to a higher grade.

There likely are achievement contexts for which there would be many proponents of a definition of success that is founded on beating others. These proponents could argue convincingly that because the prime purpose of such contexts is, for example, identification and selection of some people over others, performance-approach goals should be considered the desired and valued motivational orientation. In the context of education, however, we would challenge such a claim for purpose. Harackiewicz et al. (2002) argued that the “multiple-goals perspective allows for the possibility that teachers and schools can achieve similar goals in different ways. . . . There is no one ‘magic bullet’ or one pathway to achieve the goals of having motivated, engaged, knowledgeable, skilled, and happy students” (p. 643). We respond by suggesting that a discussion must ensue with questions such as the following: Motivated toward what?, Engaged in what way?, How knowledgeable and skilled and for what purpose?, and Happy about what?

The suggestion to revise achievement goal theory seems to us to be based on the desire to replace the simplistic statement “mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always bad” with the simplistic statement “mastery goals are always good and performance goals are always good.” Obviously, neither statement is true. The desirability of mastery goals, performance goals, or any of their combinations depends on the purposes espoused in the achievement context. In a discussion over the purposes of education, Harackiewicz and her colleagues may argue that besting others and extrinsic rewards are worthy and valued purposes (cf. Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2001). We tend to disagree and argue that some of the primary purposes of education should be educating everyone, facilitating social responsibility, and developing critical reflection over societal processes that enhance inequality and injustice—purposes that do not go along with defining school success as winning a competition. We believe that research results do

not provide a moral justification to reproduce social institutions that highlight values of social inequality and competition. Emphatically, we think that a conversation that tackles these issues is important, indeed crucial (see Johnston & Ross, 2001). Particularly with the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and standards in educational contexts that are going through demographic and pedagogical changes, the debate over purposes takes on a new significance. However, we also think that phrasing this conversation in terms of research findings and characterizing opinions as theoretical revisions is misleading and masks the fact that what is under discussion are the valued purposes of contexts such as education.

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