CHAPTER 2

STRIVING TO VALIDATE COMPETENCE VERSUS STRIVING TO ATTAIN NORMATIVE SUPERIORITY

Two Distinct Motivational Processes With Different Implications for the Self

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ABSTRACT

Students encounter many obstacles during learning. When difficulties arise, some display willingness to overcome them with sustained effort and persistence, while others despair and give up prematurely. These differences in student responses and degrees of psychological well-being toward impediments cannot be attributed entirely to differences in student ability. Two students with similar ability and achievement history often demonstrate vastly different reactions to the same challenges and potential failures. Why do such differences exist? In this chapter, we focus on two underlying purposes with
which students approach achievement tasks, as one possible answer to this question. Among many achievement goals proposed during the past several decades, mastery goals and performance goals have been associated with the most contrasting patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior in the achievement context. Students with mastery goals believe ability is malleable and thus strive to improve their competence by mastering novel tasks. Students with performance goals believe ability is fixed and hence strive to demonstrate their superior competence or to hide their inferior competence. We propose that there is more to the story—we argue that, even when students pursue the same performance goals, the psychological experience they undergo is qualitatively different, depending on whether they strive primarily to validate competence or to attain normatively superior competence. In this chapter, we present a brief overview of the achievement goal theory, identify contentious issues in extant achievement goal research, and argue for the need to distinguish between the ability and normative goals that have different implications for positive psychology. We discuss how this distinction can advance our understanding of student motivation and psychological well-being.

Imagine two students, Students A and B, who have similar achievement history. Imagine further that they exhibit contrasting motivational and behavioral patterns in the classroom, despite their comparable levels of competence. Student A likes to try out novel and challenging tasks, is always eager to answer teachers’ questions, and, most of all, is not easily discouraged by unsuccessful performances or occasional wrong answers. In contrast, Student B shows clear preference for easy tasks, answers teachers’ questions only when she is certain about the correctness of her answers, and is heavily influenced by whether her performance is judged to be a success or a failure by others. Teachers will attest to the ubiquity of Students A’s and B’s in their classrooms.

Achievement goal theory had been proposed to fill this gap, in which objective competence could not fully explain the distinct patterns of motivated cognition, affect, and behavior among children. In its original conceptualization, achievement goal orientation refers to the purposes or reasons that individuals pursue during achievement-related activities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & Dweck, 1988). Learning-goal oriented students focus on improving their ability by learning new things, while performance-goal oriented students focus on validating their superior ability to others. This early dichotomous view on achievement goal has since given way to a trichotomous, a $2 \times 2$, or even a $3 \times 2$ framework (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011).

At the heart of this differentiation lies the issue of how to define performance goals, which is the focus of the present chapter. We first introduce a brief history of achievement goal theory and research, followed by discussion of conceptual and operational definitions of performance goals and associated problems. We then call for attention to the distinctive psychological
mechanism underlying two types of performance goals—striving to validate one’s competence and striving to attain normative superiority. In doing so, we pay particular attention to the relative salience of self-worth threat that accompanies each performance goal and how it leads to different processes and outcomes related to students’ psychological well-being.

**BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENT GOAL THEORY AND RESEARCH**

**Dichotomous Framework: Effort vs. Ability**

Early achievement goal conceptualizations were based on the dichotomous model comprised of mastery and performance goals. Diverse initial labels such as learning and performance goals (Dweck, 1986), task- and ego-involvement (Nicholls, 1984), and mastery and ability goals (Butler, 1992) were later unified as mastery and performance goals (Ames, 1992). Regardless of the specific term used to denote the construct, the two contrasting achievement goals were thought to generate mastery and helpless patterns among students, respectively, especially under the threat of potential and actual failure.

According to Dweck (1986), implicit theory of ability, and dissimilar views toward the role of effort and ability that emanate from the theory, were the presumed cause of different motivation patterns. Students who espouse incremental theory believe that ability is something that can improve significantly by learning new things. Based on this belief, these students pursue mastery goals of developing their competence by investing effort and mastering new skills. Mastery goals have been linked to high levels of interest, persistence, self-efficacy, and positive affect as well as deep strategy use (Butler, 1992; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Linnenbrink, 2005; Wolters et al., 1996). The benefits of mastery goals have been particularly pronounced upon failure or setback, because students with mastery goals tend to perceive failure as an opportunity to learn and improve. The overall motivation did not differ significantly between low- and high-achieving students when they pursue mastery goals (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

In contrast, students who espouse entity theory believe that ability is fixed and there is an inverse relationship between effort and ability such that having to expend effort indicates lack of ability. These students tend to adopt performance goals, which represent the desire to demonstrate their competence, as a way of proving their innate smartness (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). They prefer easy tasks where the danger of failure is minimal or extremely difficult; tasks where failure does not signify low ability. They are quick to experience cognitive impairment and strong negative emotions
upon failure, which lead to helplessness. These maladaptive responses have been demonstrated most clearly by students with low competence, but those with high competence have also been observed to sacrifice a learning opportunity to maintain positive self-concept of ability when they pursue performance goals (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

**Trichotomous Framework: Approach vs. Avoidance**

As research on achievement goals continued, positive correlations of performance goals were observed with achievement variables (e.g., Bouffard, Boisvert, Vezeau, & Larouche, 1995; Wolters et al., 1996). These correlations were puzzling because performance goals in the dichotomous model represented maladaptive motivational orientations and a threat to psychological well-being and, as such, were presumed to correlate negatively with performance. To resolve this discrepancy, Elliot introduced the approach-avoidance distinction into achievement goal theory and proposed a trichotomous achievement goal framework (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996).

The approach and avoidance distinction was adopted from the early achievement motive literature (Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, 1985). Achievement motives were posited as motivational dispositions that direct individuals toward positive or negative possibilities, which operate as inner driving forces that do not change easily. Need for achievement and fear of failure were construed as the major achievement motives, reflecting positive and negative orientations in achievement goals, respectively. Thus, achievement goals were presumed to be competence-based cognitive mediators that regulate and link achievement motives to achievement behaviors (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Thrash, 2001).

This distinction of approach and avoidance motives were applied only to the performance goal in the trichotomous model: performance-approach goals now represented strivings for achieving positive possibilities such as outperforming others and validating one’s ability, whereas performance-avoidance goals represented strivings for avoiding negative possibilities such as performing worse than others and revealing one’s incompetence. Upon this distinction, various maladaptive outcomes such as test anxiety, low self-efficacy, intrinsic value and achievement were consistently associated with performance-avoidance goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Shim & Ryan, 2005; Sideridis, 2005). Performance-approach goals demonstrated positive relationships with academic achievement (Diseth & Kobbeltvedt, 2010; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Senko & Hulleman, 2013), although they were also positively correlated with some detrimental variables such as test anxiety (Bong, 2009; Linnenbrink, 2005) and
use of surface learning strategies (Phan, 2010). It remains unclear, therefore, whether performance-approach goals are truly adaptive for psychological well-being.

2 × 2 and 3 × 2 Frameworks: Further Specifications

More recently, the approach-avoidance distinction was applied to the mastery goal as well, making it possible to classify achievement goals by goal definition and goal valence. The goal definition dimension has to do with the way competence is defined and distinguishes between mastery goals, in which competence is defined in an absolute, intra-individual sense, and performance goals, in which competence is defined in a normative, inter-individual sense. The goal valence dimension distinguishes between approach and avoidance goals as described above. Combination of the goal definition and goal valence dimensions produces the 2 × 2 framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

The 2 × 2 classifications generated a mastery-avoidance goal in addition to the three achievement goals specified in the trichotomous model. In mastery-avoidance goals, competence is evaluated by task-based or intra-personal standards as is the case in mastery-approach goals. Unlike mastery-approach goals, however, mastery-avoidance goals rely on the avoidance regulatory focus. Individuals pursuing mastery-avoidance goals are thus presumed to strive for avoiding misunderstanding, not learning as much as possible, or deterioration in skills that one had already mastered. However, adolescent students rarely mention mastery-avoidance goals spontaneously without the presence of an explicit prompt (Lee & Bong, 2016). Also, with components of mastery that are conducive to various facets of positive psychology, combined with components of avoidance that are deleterious to psychological well-being, it is difficult to explicate the exact nature of mastery-avoidance goals.

Lastly, the 3 × 2 classifications were proposed by Elliot and his colleagues who claimed that further conceptual separation is needed between task-based and intra-personal (i.e., self-based) criteria of competence evaluation used in mastery goals (Elliot et al., 2011). According to these researchers, task-focused and self-focused competence evaluation could bring about different motivational consequences. In their study, task-approach goals functioned better than self-approach goals (i.e., intra-personal) in predicting phenomenological motivation variables such as intrinsic motivation, learning efficacy, and absorption in class. Even though the conceptual delineations of various achievement goal dimensions are interesting, the 2 × 2 and 3 × 2 models have not received as much attention as the trichotomous
model, largely because of the difficulty in empirically validating mastery-avoidance goals (Bong, 2009).

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN PERFORMANCE GOALS

Achievement Goals as Underlying Reasons or Aims of Achievement Behavior

A concurrent issue alongside the proliferation of achievement goals described above is the definitions of the achievement goal construct itself. Initially, achievement goal theory had been introduced to explain why students displayed mastery or helpless patterns, despite similar ability levels (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). That is, the degree to which students overcame difficulties, maintained interest, and engaged in an achievement activity did not entirely depend on their levels of competence. Rather, how they construed the situation and interpreted the achievement events exerted significant influences on the subsequent psychological processes (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Achievement goals were thought to operate as a cognitive schema that guided the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to achievement events (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

From this perspective, the underlying reasons that students bring into the achievement context are the essence of achievement goals because these reasons determine how students interpret achievement related information including the task, success and failure outcomes, and effort and ability accompanying the task pursuit. For example, when students engage in a writing task for the reasons of developing their writing skills, difficulties experienced during the process of writing could be perceived as necessary steps to reach an improved level of writing performance. In contrast, when students engage in the same writing task for the reasons of showing off their writing skills, then the writing task itself could be perceived as the means to demonstrate their superior writing ability. Difficulties experienced during writing or low evaluation scores on writing assignments would be recognized as indication of poor writing ability. These different interpretations create qualitatively distinct motivational and emotional patterns (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

Defining achievement goals as reasons, however, was criticized by some researchers who favor a narrower definition (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Elliot & Thrash, 2001). These researchers argue that goals should represent either concrete or abstract objects that one is committed to attain (Elliot & Fryer, 2008). Elliot (1999) thus defined achievement goals as “(relatively) specific standards for competence, the cognitive
representations that focus individuals on a competence-based possibility” (p. 174) and claimed that achievement goals should be construed as aims that individuals pursue as an end-state, rather than as underlying reasons of achievement behavior.

Advocates of the “achievement goals-as-aims” perspective argue that reasons should be separated from the competence-based aims. When an individual pursues an aim of obtaining superior competence, for instance, different reasons such as pleasing one’s parents, proving one’s smartness, and simply gauging one’s competence could undergird this aim. These various reasons are not at the core of achievement goals because they are not necessarily founded upon competence per se but instead serve as one of many antecedents of competence-based aims (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). Defining achievement goals as “reasons and purposes” underlying achievement behavior is to be avoided, these researchers claim, because combining reasons and aims makes the definition achievement goals imprecise. Further, it is the aims, not reasons, which are the proximal regulators of behaviors.

However, it is an open question whether individuals distinguish between competence-based aims and reasons clearly and whether these two constructs play an independent role in directing individuals’ behaviors in achievement situations. To address this problem, Elliot and Thrash (2001) came up with the notion of “goal complexes” and suggested that behaviors could differ depending on what types of reasons are coordinated with the given aim. Vansteenkiste and his colleagues argued that aims combined with controlled reasons would exert a negative influence on regulating behaviors compared to aims combined with autonomous reasons (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014). Controlled reasons refer to engaging in an activity to satisfy the needs and expectations of others, to gain rewards, or to avoid any sanctions from the outside; autonomous reasons refer to engaging in an activity to satisfy the inward criteria such as interest, fun, and personal meaningfulness, which are key ingredients of positive psychology (Sheldon & King, 2001).

Defining achievement goals solely as aims, in effect, switches the focus of the construct from “why” individuals strive to achieve to “what” they want to achieve (Molden & Dweck, 2000). These two incompatible definitions of achievement goals have spawned operational definitions that are similarly discordant. Nowhere is this inconsistency more evident than in the effect associated with performance goals, to which we now turn.

Inconsistent Operationalizations of Performance Goals

Depending on which definition of the achievement goal construct (i.e., aims or reasons) researchers adopt in their own research, individual
achievement goals such as mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals have been defined differently. Although this definitional inconsistency is witnessed in all three achievement goals, it is nowhere more evident than in the operational definitions and consequences of performance-approach goals. Items measuring mastery and performance-avoidance goals are also different in their focus by the theoretical definition adopted. Nevertheless, the explanatory and predictive patterns associated with these two achievement goals have been fairly consistent regardless of the particular set of items used to assess them. In comparison, the effects of performance-approach goals on motivation and performance differ substantially by the theoretical definition and accompanying operationalization, which have made these goals the center of achievement goal controversy and the focus of this chapter.

Comparison of the items in the two arguably most widely used achievement goal scales in the literature, the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS; Midgley et al., 2000) and the Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Revised (AGQ-R; Elliot & Murayama, 2008), illustrates some of the key differences in performance-approach goal operationalization. In PALS, achievement goals are defined as reasons or purposes for engaging in achievement-related behaviors in the given achievement context. In the original performance-approach goal scale, two of the five items described ability validation concerns, while the other three focused on outperforming other students. One of the ability validation items also had a normative reference in the description of achievement purposes (e.g., “... to show my teacher that I’m smarter than the other students”). The item stems varied as well, from feelings (e.g., “I would feel...”), desires (e.g., “I want to do...”), to values (e.g., “... is important to me”). The items were later revised so all five performance-approach goal items now refer to ability validation concerns, as in “... to show others that I’m good at my class work.” Two items represent ability validation in a normative sense (e.g., “... to look smart in comparison to the other students in my class”). The item stems were also modified to more explicitly indicate reasons and purposes.

Unlike PALS, the Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Revised (AGQ-R; Elliot & Murayama, 2008) defines achievement goals as competence-based aims that one strives to achieve. Operational definitions of the initial performance-approach goal items in AGQ lacked consistency. Among the six items, four focused on normative comparison, while the other two focused on ability validation (Elliot & Church, 1997). As was the case with PALS, these items were later revised so performance-approach goals more clearly represent the idea of attaining normative competence or outcome, using phrases such as “do better than other students,” “do well compared to others,” and “get a better grade than most of the other students” (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Recently, AGQ-R eliminated an outcome-related item
(i.e., grade) because outcome accomplishment could be comprehended as an index of task mastery or ability improvement (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). In addition, the item stems have been made more uniform to indicate aims (e.g., “my aim is . . .,” “my goal is . . .,” and “I am striving to . . .”).

Whereas the performance-approach goal items in PALS emphasize ability validation and those in AGQ-R highlight normative competence exclusively, Grant and Dweck (2003) proposed three different types of performance-approach goals, namely, outcome goals, ability goals, and normative goals. In their conceptualization of performance-approach goals, outcome goals focus on achieving desirable performance or outcomes such as grades; ability goals represent the desire to validate one’s intelligence to others; and normative goals address the striving to attain normatively superior outcomes as well as to demonstrate normative ability. The normative goal items of Grant and Dweck are thus somewhat different from those in AGQ-R that focus entirely on attaining normative competence.

These examples from popular achievement goal scales show that operational definitions of performance-approach goals are quite diverse and these variations stem out of how achievement goals are construed. When achievement goals are defined as reasons underlying achievement behavior, performance-approach goals are often illustrated as the desire to validate one’s ability. When achievement goals are thought to represent competence-based aims, then performance-approach goals embody the aim of attaining normative competence.

**Need to Distinguish Between Validation of Ability and Attainment of Normative Competence**

The conceptual discrimination between the desire to validate ability and that to attain normative competence was identified in adolescents’ descriptions of their own achievement goal pursuit. Urdan and Mestas (2006) interviewed high school seniors to examine why they would pursue performance goals. Their responses represented appearance-approach, appearance-avoidance, competition-approach, and competition-avoidance performance goals. Some wanted to appear capable, while others wanted to avoid appearing incapable; some strove to outperform others, while others strove to avoid underperforming others. In other words, both validation of ability and attainment of normative competence were separate as well as genuine concerns in the minds of these students.

When Lee and Bong (2016) asked three independent groups of Korean middle school students to write five most important reasons that they study in an open-ended format and classified the responses using existing achievement goal frameworks, similar results were obtained. Both ability
validation and normative competence goals featured prominently among student responses. These results strongly indicate that both kinds of performance goals represent legitimate forms of achievement goals and that they need to be assessed independently.

In fact, several researchers have pointed out that behind the varying effects of performance goals lie these two different conceptualizations (e.g., Grant & Dweck, 2003; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Most notably, a recent meta-analysis on achievement goal measures showed that relationships between performance-approach goals and achievement differed depending on how performance-approach goals were operationalized (Hulleman et al., 2010). In this study, appearance (i.e., ability), normative, and evaluative goals (i.e., combination of ability and normative goals) were recognized as the three most popular operational definitions of performance-approach goals. Performance-approach goals were related positively to achievement when they emphasized normative superiority but negatively to achievement when they stressed appearance or evaluative concerns.

This issue of performance-approach goal components was also seriously noted by Grant and Dweck (2003). They explored whether university students would endorse different types of performance-approach goals in their class and whether and what unique motivational patterns would emerge upon receiving hypothetical failure scenarios per the goal adopted. Ability validation goals, normative competence goals, and outcome attainment goals were assessed separately. As expected, students not only distinguished the different performance-approach goals but also demonstrated distinct motivational patterns for each goal. A wide range of negative motivational indexes accompanied ability validation goals, which included loss of intrinsic motivation and self-worth, withdrawal of time and effort, and ability-based failure attributions. Normative competence goals did not display significant relationships with any of these outcomes. Outcome attainment goals exhibited mixed relationships and so were discussed as a hybrid of mastery and performance goals.

Together, the available evidence attests to the psychological salience of ability validation and normative competence goals in achievement endeavor and the independent nature of these two performance-approach goals in motivational processes. It appears that adolescent learners and college students alike suffer from negative cognitive and emotional consequences when they pursue ability validation goals (Grant & Dweck, 2003; Hulleman et al., 2010). For individuals striving to prove their ability, even a remote hint of failure threatens their psychological well-being. We argue that ability goals and normative goals should be measured and examined separately because they entail qualitatively different psychological mechanisms and
consequences, especially from the perspective of positive psychology, as pursuit of happiness and subjective well-being is its key component.

DISTINCT PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS UNDERLYING DIFFERENT PERFORMANCE GOALS

Relative Concern Toward Self-Worth Protection

Self-Worth Threat in Ability Validation Goals

Students pursuing ability-validation goals are not only sensitive to ability-relevant messages but also quick to infer ability-relevant cues from the achievement context. They are concerned about how their intelligence would be reflected in their task performance, as they are likely entity theorists and view ability to be fixed (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Haimovitz, Wormington, & Corpus, 2011). Because ability is perceived as a stable personal trait that does not change easily, a task serves as a means to attest to one’s ability or its inadequacy (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Molden & Dweck, 2000). Obtaining success on the task validates one’s ability, leading to increased self-concept; experiencing failure indicates lack of ability, affecting one’s self-concept negatively.

For students who endorse ability-validation goals, task engagement is the process of justifying their ability and ascertaining their self-worth (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1996). In an earlier experimental study that reported a harmful effect of performance goals, for instance, the performance evaluation context was manipulated in such a way that it provoked self-worth threat in the participating children (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Specifically, the children were instructed to choose from tasks at different levels of difficulty and told that they would need to solve the selected task in the presence of an experimenter who stated, “it (the task you choose) will really show me what kids can do” (p. 7). This instruction was designed to make participants infer that their level of ability would be revealed by their performance on the task. The children in this performance-goal condition blamed their lack of ability to a greater degree, reported higher levels of negative affect, and demonstrated lower persistence on the task upon experiencing failure, compared to the children in the mastery-goal condition.

This finding indicates that students’ psychological well-being is put at risk when they endorse ability-validation goals. According to positive psychology, feelings of psychological well-being and happiness depend on the subjective evaluations of life events and these evaluations, in turn, are influenced by the goals and values that individuals uphold (Lucas & Diener, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2001; Oishi, Diener, Suh, & Lucas, 1999). Even when faced with an identical failure situation, subjective interpretations of that
specific failure experience can vary widely across students, depending on what types of goals they pursue and how much value they attach to the achievement task under consideration.

Unfortunately, many students are doomed to failure because the limited and competitive reward structure prevalent at school does not allow all students to be acknowledged as high achievers (Covington, 1992). To make matters worse, great importance is attached to attaining high achievement at school, reflecting the value of contemporary society that regards such accomplishment highly. Consequently, students who approve ability-validation goals cannot help but become anxious about potential failure on important academic tasks because the outcome of their achievement striving is closely tied to their personal self-worth. It would be difficult to maintain their self-worth when fail since failure outcomes are strongly indicative of incompetence. Loss of self-worth is damaging to one’s subjective well-being because it weakens one’s positive self-image (Covington, 1984).

Evidence that ability-validation goal pursuit is detrimental to one’s psychological well-being is also found in its association with other self-related constructs. Self-compassion represents a form of self-acceptance, being considerate and kind to oneself despite failure. It was positively related to various signature constructs of positive psychology such as optimism, happiness, positive affect, and wisdom (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007) but negatively associated with ability-validation goals (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Ability-validation goals also correlated negatively with authenticity, which emphasizes genuine feeling and belief in acknowledging one’s achievement (Pajares, 2001).

Self-worth is more easily jeopardized when one tries to validate one’s ability to others than to oneself. In a study by Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003), college students reported their self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth, or the sources of self-worth, across seven domains. Dependencies on the “outward” self-worth sources such as appearance and approval from others were more strongly associated with decreases in self-esteem and maladaptive personality features than those on the “inward” self-worth sources such as virtue or God’s love.

Self-Worth Threat in Normative Competence Goals

Compared to ability-validation goals, normative competence goals appear to be safer from the immediate self-worth threat. In a study by Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996), participants performed an experimental task, which was introduced as a task designed to identify the possession of specific skills such as finding hidden puzzles, rather than global cognitive ability such as intelligence. Instruction that followed emphasized the diagnostic nature of the task for superior competence by stating, “students are fairly comparable in their ability to solve Nina puzzles, but some students stand
out because they do quite well on the puzzles” (p. 464). In addition, all experimental procedures were administered by audio recordings in the absence of an experimenter, so potential threats of ability judgment by others were further minimized. Students who pursued normative-approach goals, perhaps not surprisingly, reported comparable levels of task enjoyment and engagement to those reported by students in the mastery-goal condition.

From a theoretical stance, pursuing normative goals can be viewed as a legitimate way of attaining competence information, grounded in the basic need for competence (Elliot & Moller, 2003). However, normative goals are distinguished from mastery goals in the type of information sought and used for competence estimation. Individuals with mastery goals judge themselves competent when they accomplish given tasks successfully by the standard of mastery or achieve significant progress compared to their previous performance; those with normative goals, in contrast, view themselves to be competent when they attain superior performance compared to the performance of others.

Social comparative information is highly diagnostic for competence appraisals because it provides additional information on one’s competence that task-based information cannot (Festinger, 1954). Efforts to acquire normative competence could thus be viewed as part of natural processes to satisfy one’s need for competence, which predicts psychological well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Self-assessment motives also facilitate normative goals, or use of social comparative information in the diagnosis of one’s own competence and attainment of normatively superior competence (Bounoua et al., 2011). Because individuals have the desire to form an accurate understanding of themselves, knowing one’s relative weaknesses and working to improve them could ultimately help sustain and advance one’s positive self-concept (Kim, Chiu, & Zou, 2010).

The reason that normative performance goals are relatively free from self-worth concerns than ability-validation performance goals may also owe to the fact that normative goals can be detached from the self and function as external and explicit standards of performance evaluation. This view is consistent with that of achievement goal researchers who argue that performance goals should be defined exclusively as normative goals (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Elliot et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, it is not too difficult to imagine a situation where individuals with normative goals are subjected to self-worth threat. Normative information is often delivered from others and made public. If students belong to a school where competition is widespread, then information on their relative standing would pose a serious threat to their self-worth. This phenomenon has often been observed in the sport domain. Whereas students pursuing normative goals often enjoy positive outcomes in the academic domain, players pursuing normative goals tend to experience less positive
outcomes in the sport domain. In this line of research, normative goals are positively associated with negative emotions including anxiety, anger, and shame (Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Auweele, 2009); interfering with task involvement by diverting individuals’ attention (Vansteenkiste, Matos, Lens, & Soenens, 2007); and negatively predicting intrinsic motivation (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2000). In none of these studies were mastery goals associated with any negative emotional or behavioral outcomes; instead, mastery goals were positively related to positive emotions, increased performance with focused attention, as well as intrinsic motivation, effort, and persistence, which ascertains the adaptive nature of mastery goals. The competitive nature of sports, coupled with the public nature of winning and losing, are presumed to invoke self-worth threat that underlie the negative consequences of normative goals in sports.

In sum, we argue that ability-verification goals are more detrimental to motivation and psychological well-being than normative-competence goals because of their stronger tie to the self-worth protection mechanism. Learners who strongly endorse ability goals would avoid potentially embarrassing or frustrating achievement situations to guard their self-worth, which may eventually hinder their academic growth. In comparison, learners who adopt normative goals would be more likely to construe academic tasks and activities as opportunities to gauge their specific competence rather than their global intelligence (Molden & Dweck, 2000). This difference may protect them from perceiving self-worth threat and help them regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors better in achievement situations.

Costs of Pursuing Ability Validation Goals

Then what are the negative consequences of pursuing ability-validation goals in achievement contexts? In the next section, we discuss some of the representative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral costs that are presumed to accompany ability-validation goals, which have direct implications for positive psychology.

Cognitive Cost: Ability-Focused Failure Attribution

As discussed earlier, the root of ability-validation goals lies in the entity belief about one’s intelligence. Individuals with ability-validation goals view ability as an internal attribute that is stable and uncontrollable (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This makes the purpose of engaging in achievement tasks to be one of judging the adequacy of their ability. Achievement outcomes are hence frequently attributed to ability. Supporting this claim, Grant and Dweck (2003) reported that college students endorsing ability goals, but not those endorsing normative goals, attributed hypothetical failures to
their inability and were involved in ruminations over failure. Self-blame, another type of global negative self-judgment, also tends to be associated with helplessness upon failure for individuals with ability validation goals (Dykman, 1998; Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992).

**Emotional Cost: Anxiety**

From the perspective of self-worth theory, anxiety is reflection of perceived incompetence that threatens one’s self-worth (Covington, 1992, 2009). Most typically, anxiety is experienced in domains and tasks on which one’s self-worth is invested and effort to achieve success signifies individuals’ attempt to maintain positive self-image (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). The tendency of validation-seeking individuals to self-blame is also known to produce high levels of anxiety, self-esteem loss, task disengagement, and depression for them (Dykman, 1998).

The positive association between ability-validation goals and anxiety is supported by empirical evidence. When upper elementary school students’ achievement goals were assessed with PALS, positive relationships were observed between ability-validation performance-approach goals and anxiety in mathematics (Bong, 2009; Linnenbrink, 2005). Dykman (1998) also reported that individuals with validation-seeking orientations exhibited greater anxiety in their anticipation of examinations relative to individuals with growth-seeking orientations. These dissimilar levels of anxiety emerged only when the context was threatening to self-worth; non-evaluative contexts such as reading a magazine did not result in different levels of anxiety between the two groups.

**Behavioral Cost: Avoidance Behaviors**

Avoidance behaviors are goal-directed behaviors with which individuals purposefully circumvent active engagement in given tasks (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002). When facing challenge, individuals with ability-validation goals are more likely to display avoidance behaviors because they could protect their self-worth by avoiding failure and low ability implications (Covington, 1992).

Help-seeking avoidance, or the tendency of learners to not seek help even when it is needed, is the most typical avoidance behavior (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001). For students who strive to demonstrate and validate their competence to others, help-seeking is seen as public revelation of one’s inability (Ryan et al., 2001). In a study by Ryan and Pintrich (1997), high school students pursuing ability-validation performance-approach goals exhibited a strong tendency to avoid seeking help. The relationship between ability validation goals and avoidance of help-seeking was mediated by perceived threat from peers or teachers. The perception that their ability would be negatively evaluated by teachers
or peers posed threat to the self-worth of these students, which prevented them from seeking the needed help (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). The link between ability-validation goals (i.e., performance-approach goals assessed by PALS) and help-seeking avoidance was repeatedly demonstrated in diverse domains, including mathematics (Bong, 2008) and English (Zusho & Barnett, 2011).

Academic self-handicapping, or intentionally creating obstacles to successful performance in fear of potential failure, is another type of avoidance behavior (Urdan & Midgley, 2001). Meeting friends or playing games the night before an important test or procrastinating the work until the very last minute are examples of self-handicapping, which provide students with a legitimate excuse should they fail. When failure is expected, students engage in these behaviors and withdraw effort from the task, so lack of ability is not the sole cause for failure. Covington and Omelich (1979) asked college students to imagine a failure situation after having expended high or low effort and with or without excuse. Students reported that it was the high-effort-without-excuse failure condition that they found most devastating because if they studied very hard and failed, they would estimate the highest level of inability on their part, expect others to similarly attribute their failure to their high inability, and feel the highest levels of dissatisfaction and shame. Ability-validation goals are expected to strengthen this tendency.

**CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Achievement goal researchers had long been interested in the difference between mastery (learning) and performance goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). It is only recently that they have started to pay attention to the subtle difference between two performance goals—the striving to validate competence and the striving to attain normative competence (Hulleman et al., 2010). In many achievement contexts, these two strivings are often intermingled and it is not always easy to separate the effect of one from that of the other. For this reason, conceptual and operational differences between them as well as different psychological mechanisms and consequences associated with them were not clearly articulated in the early achievement goal theory and research.

We have argued in this chapter, responding to the call of Grant and Dweck (2003) that ability validation and normative competence attainment are both primary concerns of individuals in achievement settings and they need to be studied separately to reach a better understanding of students’ motivated behavior. We have reviewed the findings associated with performance-approach goals assessed by PALS, which largely represent ability
validation goals, and those associated with performance-approach goals assessed by AGQ-R, which represent normative competence goals. While doing so, we have noted the relative importance of self-worth tied to each of these two performance goals.

In our view, self-worth protection is the primary psychological mechanism that characterizes the detrimental motivational process associated with ability validation goals, a process that runs against psychological well-being and happiness. To prove our point, we have illustrated the cognitive, affective, and behavioral vulnerability that can be traced back to ability goals. The arguments we have advanced in this chapter are mainly theoretical in nature, which await empirical tests.

A good starting point for future studies may be a formal test of discriminant validity for ability validation and normative competence goals. Currently, each goal is measured by one or the other popular achievement goal scale and hence almost always measured separately, making it difficult to examine their relationship with each other. Grant and Dweck (2003) developed independent scales to assess ability and normative goals and performed an initial test of the scales with groups of college students using hypothetical achievement scenarios. It is necessary to explore these scales with a wider range of student populations in actual achievement settings.

In Grant and Dweck (2003) as well as in this chapter, the distinction between ability validation goals and normative goals were discussed in reference to only performance-approach goals and not performance-avoidance goals. Given the clear divergence between approach and avoidance goals evidenced in prior research, it seems worthwhile to compare the avoidance form of these goals in future research. More specifically, one dimension on which performance goals can differ may be why they strive to achieve—to demonstrate their ability to others or to attain superior ability to that of others—while another dimension may be whether they strive to approach positive such possibilities or to avoid negative such possibilities (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Combining the ability-normative distinction with the approach-avoidance distinction generates four performance goals and we believe each carries different implications for one’s self-worth, subjective well-being, and positive affect (Oishi et al., 1999). Clarifying these psychological processes will help us understand why otherwise capable learners suffer from anxiety or purposefully avoid academic engagement.

Uncovering critical antecedents for ability validation and normative competence goals will also be important. Achievement motives such as need for achievement and fear of failure, implicit theory of intelligence, and perceived competence have commonly been linked to achievement goals in past research (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & Church, 1997). Among these antecedents, we suggest that perceived competence, in particular, receive a second look. Moderation of the
performance goal effect by perceived competence was a key prediction in Dweck’s (1986) original theory, which has not received clear empirical support. When ability goals and normative goals were independently assessed in Grant and Dweck (2003), however, students with high past achievement scores performed better even when they pursued ability validation goals. This finding is reminiscent of Elliott and Dweck’s (1988) earlier observation that children who tried to demonstrate their ability showed improved strategy use when they were good at the given tasks. Learners with strong perceptions of competence, therefore, could engage in adaptive motivational behaviors for enhancing their self-worth, before they are faced with formidable challenge. Researchers are encouraged to examine the complex interplay between achievement goals and their presumed antecedents and consequences.

Finding out the role of significant others seems imperative especially for gauging the potential impact of ability validation goals. Ziegler, Dresel, and Stoeger (2008), for example, assessed multiple ability-focused performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals by asking students how much they wanted their parents, teachers, or classmates to either notice that they were good and able or not notice they were bad and incompetent. The German participants clearly differentiated not only performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals but also ability validation goals toward parents, teachers, and classmates. Parent-addressed ability goals displayed the most maladaptive motivational pattern by correlating positively with test anxiety and negatively with mastery goals, academic self-concept, and task value. In future investigations, it may be important to consider if ability validation goals take on different meaning by whom they are addressed toward.

Finally, culture may also moderate the effect of ability validation goals. Culture plays an important role in construing the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Independent self-construal is more prevalent in Western cultures, whereas interdependent self-construal is predominant in Eastern cultures. The two self-views differ in how much they allow the opinions of and relationships with significant others to negotiate the way one comes to an understanding of oneself. Ability validation goals may be more strongly endorsed in Eastern cultures in achievement situations because having their ability recognized and approved by others would be more important for students with interdependent self-construal. These efforts to recognize and delineate distinct motivational processes and consequences associated with ability-validation and normative-competence performance goals will be able to put an end to the performance goal debate (Harackiewicz et al., 2000; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001) and expand our understanding of student motivation and psychological well-being.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2014S1A5B8060944).

NOTE

1. Mastery and performance goals were commonly referred as, respectively, task and ego goals in the sport domain. One of the scales that assess ego goals is the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ; Duda, 1989) and most of the ego goal items in this scale represent normative goals.

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