Can social goals enrich our understanding of students' motivational goals?

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Achievement goal theory has emerged as a dominant paradigm for understanding student motivation. However, its focus on mastery and performance goals as central constructs has led to a neglect of the role of social goals in motivating students. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of different kinds of social goals (social affiliation and social concern goals) on various types of educational outcomes. Results indicate that even after controlling for the effects of the oft-examined mastery and performance goals, social goals were still able to predict additional variance in the outcomes of interest. Social concern goals were shown be an adaptive type of social goal. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: achievement goals, social goals, student motivation
Students have different reasons for engagement in school. Some students work hard not only for academic but also for social reasons such as to be with friends or to help peers with schoolwork (Dowson & McInerney, 2001, 2003). These social reasons for schooling, also called social goals, can be powerful constructs in explaining student motivation (Urdan & Maehr, 1995).

However, the dominant paradigm for examining achievement motivation in the educational setting, achievement goal theory, has not devoted much attention to social goals with its focus mostly on mastery and performance goals (for reviews, see Elliot, 2005; Maehr & Zusho, 2009). This lack of research on social goals seems unwarranted given that schools are inherently social domains (Martin & Dowson, 2009) and that students do endorse various kinds of social goals (Dowson & McInerney, 2001, 2003, 2004; Lemos, 1996). In addition, this lack of attention becomes even more salient when research is conducted in a collectivist Asian setting where the social factors for schooling are more salient compared to the West (Kim & Park, 2008; Kumar & Maehr, 2007; Yu & Yang, 1994).

The rationale behind the present study therefore is to examine the relationship of social goals to important educational outcomes among Hong Kong Chinese secondary school students. We included two different types of social goals: social affiliation and social concern goals drawn from personal investment (PI) theory. In terms of outcomes, we looked at the effect of these social goals on learning strategies (deep and surface), effort, and motivational engagement, which have all been implicated in successful learning.

**Achievement Goal Theory**

Achievement goal theory proposes that students’ motivation can be understood by looking at the reasons or purposes they adopt while engaged in academic work (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). It is grounded in a distinction between mastery and performance goals. Students who pursue mastery goals in classrooms want to develop academic competence, while those who pursue performance goals want to demonstrate their competence to others through social comparisons (Elliot, 1999). Later, the approach and avoidance dimensions were added to the initial distinction between mastery and performance goals (Elliot, 2005). Thus, the most recent modification of the achievement goal theory proposes four types of
goals: (a) mastery-approach goal, which refers to wanting to achieve to
gain new knowledge and improve one’s competence; (b) performance-
approach goal, which refers to wanting to achieve to outperform other
students and demonstrate competence before others; (c) mastery-
avoidance goal, which refers to avoiding misunderstanding and the loss of
one’s skills; and (d) performance-avoidance goals, which refers to
avoiding showing incompetence relative to others. In this study, we limit
our examination to mastery-approach and performance-approach goals
(which we hereafter refer to as mastery and performance goals,
respectively, for the sake of simplicity) because we want to examine their
relative salience with regard to social goals, which are operationalized in
this study as approach goals.

**Personal Investment (PI) Theory**

Although research on achievement goals has generated an impressive
amount of findings with regard to the consequences associated with the
pursuit of mastery and performance goals, relatively little is known about
the outcomes associated with social goals. A better model for examining a
wider range of goals including social goals and their impact on various
educational outcomes is PI theory, which posits a multidimensional model
of motivational goals (Maehr, 1984; Maehr & McInerney, 2004). PI
theory recognizes that there are different reasons for engaging in academic
settings and proposes three distinct classes of goals as underpinning
achievement motivation: mastery goals, performance goals, and social
goals (McInerney, Yeung, & McInerney, 2001; Watkins, McInerney, &
Lee, 2002) The definitions of mastery and performance goals in PI theory
converge with the definitions proposed in achievement goal theory. Social
goals, on the other hand, are defined as a class of goals where the
motivation is primarily socially driven and can be construed as social
reasons for engagement in the academic domain. Within the domain of PI
theory, two types of social goals have been identified (McInerney &
Liem, 2009; Watkins et al., 2002):

*Social affiliation goals:* Seeking belongingness to a group when
doing schoolwork

*Social concern goals:* Seeking the opportunity to show concern or
provide help to other students

Although not as extensively researched as the above-mentioned
achievement goals, social goals are nevertheless represented in the
literature (e.g., Maehr, 1984; Maehr & McInerney, 2004; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). However, relatively little is known with regard to the consequences associated with the pursuit of social goals.

**The Present Study**

The present study aims to examine how the two types of social goals drawn from PI theory are related to different types of educational outcomes. To this end we investigated whether social goals predicted additional variance after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals on desired learning outcomes. We controlled for the effects of mastery and performance goals because they are more well researched in the motivational literature, and because we wanted to see whether the addition of social goals could account for additional variance in the outcomes. Educational outcomes examined included learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement in school. These outcomes have all been implicated in successful learning. In line with the exploratory nature of the study, no specific hypotheses about social goals were given a priori.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 164 Hong Kong secondary school participants, with approximately half drawn from two high-ability schools and half drawn from two low-ability schools, participated in the study. There were 114 males and 50 females in the sample, and their average age was 13.45 years old. In all, 81 students were from Form 1 and 83 were from Form 4.

**Measures**

*Achievement Goals.* The Mastery Goal subscale (e.g., “I am most motivated when I am becoming better at my work”) and the Performance Goal subscale (e.g., “I am most motivated when I am doing better than others”) of the General Achievement Goal Orientation Scale (GAGOS; McInerney et al., 2001) were used to tap mastery-approach and performance-approach goals, respectively.
Social Goals and Educational Outcomes

Social Goals. The Social Affiliation (e.g., “I prefer to work with other people at school rather than alone”) and Social Concern (e.g., “I like to help other people at school”) subscales of the Inventory of School Motivation–Chinese (ISM-C; Watkins et al., 2002) were used to measure the two types of social goals.

Learning Strategies. To assess different forms of learning strategies, we used the Deep Strategies (e.g., “I try to relate what I learn in one subject to what I have learned in other subjects”) and Surface Strategies subscales (e.g., “In most subjects I try to do enough just to make sure I pass, and no more”) of the Learning Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1992).

Effort. To measure effort expended in schoolwork, we used the Effort subscale of the ISM-C (e.g., “I don’t mind working a long time at schoolwork that I find interesting”). This subscale measures willingness to exert effort to improve schoolwork.

Motivational Engagement. To measure the students’ perceived motivational level, we used the Global Motivation subscale of the GAGOS. This measures students’ subjective perception of how motivated they are in school (e.g., “I feel motivated most of the time at school”).

Procedures

All questionnaires were administered by a trained research assistant. Only students who signed the informed consent form and whose parents agreed to participate in the study were included.

Results

Descriptives

The means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients are shown in Table 1. The correlations among the relevant variables are shown in Table 2. A rank ordering of goal endorsement indicates that mastery goals ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.48$) were the most highly endorsed, followed by social affiliation ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.51$) and social concern goals ($M = 3.51, SD = 0.59$), respectively. Performance goals were the least highly endorsed ($M = 3.13, SD = 0.74$). The reliabilities of the scales were all acceptable.
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mastery goals</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performance goals</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social affiliation</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social concern</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Deep learning</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Surface learning</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Effort</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Global motivation</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships Among the Variables

As seen in Table 2, the two kinds of social goals were all modestly correlated with mastery goals ($r = .328$, $r = .329$ for social affiliation and concern goals). However, they were not significantly correlated with performance goals.

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine whether social goals accounted for a significant amount of variance on the educational outcomes beyond that accounted for by mastery goals and performance goals. At Step 1, mastery and performance goals were entered into the model. At Step 2, the two types of social goals were entered. Results of the hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 3. Results indicate that social goals predicted additional variance in the different educational outcomes after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals. At Step 1, mastery goals were associated with a host of positive outcomes such as deep learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement. Performance goals failed to predict most of the relevant outcomes except for motivational engagement. At Step 2, social goals as a block predicted additional variance in all outcomes examined including deep learning strategies, surface learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals. More specifically, deep learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement were all positively predicted by social concern goals. Social affiliation goals were not significant predictors of any of the outcomes examined. Mastery goals remained positive predictors of deep learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement at Step 2.
Table 2. Bivariate correlations among achievement goals, social goals, and educational outcomes

<table>
<thead>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Mastery goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>.378***</td>
<td>.328***</td>
<td>.329***</td>
<td>.327***</td>
<td>−.163†</td>
<td>.599***</td>
<td>.522***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performance goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>−.032</td>
<td>.251**</td>
<td>.467***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td>.405***</td>
<td>.127</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.212*</td>
<td>.221**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Social concern</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.368***</td>
<td>−.126</td>
<td>.474***</td>
<td>.383***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Deep learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−.275***</td>
<td>.540***</td>
<td>.358***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Surface learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−.352***</td>
<td>−.169*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Effort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.547***</td>
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<td>8. Motivational engagement</td>
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†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analyses for goals as predictors of learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Deep Learning</th>
<th></th>
<th>Surface Learning</th>
<th></th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th></th>
<th>Motivational Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery goals</td>
<td>2.182</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>.318***</td>
<td>−1.349</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>0.632</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance goals</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>0.215</td>
<td>0.555</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mastery goals</td>
<td>1.633</td>
<td>0.604</td>
<td>.238**</td>
<td>−1.275</td>
<td>0.706</td>
<td>−.173</td>
<td>0.544</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance goals</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.558</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social affiliation</td>
<td>−0.562</td>
<td>0.532</td>
<td>−.089</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>0.622</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>−0.090</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social concern</td>
<td>1.782</td>
<td>0.458</td>
<td>.328***</td>
<td>−0.557</td>
<td>0.535</td>
<td>−.095</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 change in $R^2$</td>
<td>.104***</td>
<td></td>
<td>.030</td>
<td></td>
<td>.360***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.370***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 change in $R^2$</td>
<td>.085***</td>
<td></td>
<td>.008</td>
<td></td>
<td>.093***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.048**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
<td>.189***</td>
<td></td>
<td>.038</td>
<td></td>
<td>.452***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.418**</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**p < .01. ***p < .001.
Discussion

This study set out to determine the relationship of social goals to important educational outcomes such as learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement. Results of this study indicate that social goals are able to predict additional variance in all of the outcomes of interest after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals. At a broad level, these findings provide support for studying social goals in order to understand student motivation. Social concern goals were found to be the strongest predictor of various outcomes among the two social goals examined. Social concern goals were positive predictors of deep learning, effort, and motivational engagement. Early studies on social concern goals have recognized that students may act in school to enhance the welfare of other students (Ford, 1992; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997; Wentzel, 1991). However, outcomes associated with this goal have not been examined systematically, with most of the earlier studies focusing only on how it can lead to academic achievement (e.g., Wentzel, 1993). Our study provides an initial indication that social concern goals can lead to a broad variety of positive outcomes, suggesting a kind of “rich get richer” effect whereby students who help others also benefit from this provision of assistance. Zero-order correlations revealed that social concern goals were positively associated with deep learning, effort, and motivational engagement and negatively related to surface learning. In the hierarchical regression analyses, social concern goals predicted additional variance in terms of deep learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement even after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals. These results corroborate the qualitative findings of Dowson and McInerney (2001, 2003), which have shown social concern goals to be related to adaptive learning outcomes. This is encouraging given that educators want students to be prosocial and to offer assistance to others in school (Wentzel, 2000). This also provides additional support for the findings of Wentzel (1991, 1994, 2003), who claimed that the desire to help others is related to academic competencies.

Social affiliation goals did not predict any additional variance in the outcome measures after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals. Apparently from these data, wanting to be with friends does not systematically relate to achievement outcomes. In future studies, it would be interesting to explore how social affiliation goals are related to learning outcomes in a collaborative learning environment. In their
review of research on motivation in collaborative learning contexts, Jarvela, Volet, and Jarvenoja (2010) concluded, “We are still short of understanding how motivation arises in social contexts, such as collaborative learning” (p. 24). Social affiliation goals might prove to be useful in understanding motivational dynamics in a collaborative classroom. The zero-order correlations, however, indicated that social affiliation goals were modestly positively correlated with both effort and motivational engagement. These positive correlations provide a counterargument to the widely held belief that affiliation goals are negatively related to achievement outcomes (McClelland, 1985). In this study, mastery goals were found to be adaptive. Mastery goals positively predicted deep learning strategies, effort, and motivational engagement. Interestingly, performance goals failed to predict most of the outcomes examined except for motivational engagement. This brings into question the predictive validity of performance goals. Indeed, some researchers have argued that performance goals are not that salient among students. For example, Brophy (2005) challenged the external validity of performance goals by pointing out that these goals are actually low incidence phenomena in the classroom. He found that students did not normally generate goals with social comparison components, thus the preponderance of performance goals in research may reflect method variance rather than person variance. In addition, Lemos (1996) showed that students spontaneously generated various kinds of social goals but rarely generated performance goals. The ultimate challenge for psychologists is to remain faithful to the psychological reality of the children (Brophy, 2005). It might be the case that social goals, especially social concern goals, are more important among students compared to performance goals. Qualitative studies have hinted at this in that students seldom mentioned performance approach goals (Lemos, 1996). An interesting finding is the positive correlations between mastery goals and the different kinds of social goals. This network of relationships suggests that achievement motivation among the Chinese has a social dimension that could account for these positive albeit modest correlations. These results can be partly explained by Yu and Yang’s (1994) assertion that in Asian societies, achievement motivation is inherently social. These results also echo the results of Iyengar and Lepper’s (1999) study, which showed that Asian and Western achievement motivation may be differentially constructed, with the former emphasizing the social and relational factors and the latter emphasizing personal and individualistic concerns.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has some important limitations. First, our study is correlational, thus it does not reveal causal connections. Second, the overall variance accounted for in the outcome variables by social goals was modest; however, Berndt and Keefe (1995) suggested that small effects might have larger cumulative effects over time. Third, the sample size for this study was quite small, in keeping with its nature as an exploratory study. Future studies could be conducted with a larger sample size and with a wider range of outcome variables. Fourth, the social goals we measured were restricted to those identified within PI theory. Some qualitative studies have indicated that there may be other types of social goals such as social responsibility goals (e.g., Dowson & McInerney, 2003), which we did not assess in the current investigation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides support for the inclusion of social goals in examining student motivation in the classroom. Motivational theorists may have been unduly limiting their field through their exclusive focus on mastery and performance goals. This exclusive focus on achievement goals might even become myopic when research findings based on relatively individualistic Western cultures are transported to more collectivist settings. Results of our study have shown that social goals could predict important educational outcomes even after controlling for the effects of mastery and performance goals.

A key implication of the current study is the recognition that students have multiple reasons for engagement in academic settings, and some of these reasons are social. This broadens our understanding of students’ motivational goals beyond the mastery–performance distinction commonly studied by achievement goal theorists. With regard to practice, this study suggests that educational interventions that tap into the social goal strivings of students to improve achievement outcomes may be more effective than those that focus on only mastery goals. Students pursue a variety of goals and “live in a multigoal environment” where “pursuit of a goal always occurs in the context of pursuing other goals in schools” (Boekaerts, 2009, p. 115). It would be best if educators could harness these social goals in promoting positive learning outcomes.
Note

1. High-ability schools refer to Band 1 schools while low-ability schools refer to Band 3 schools in the Hong Kong secondary school system.

References


社會目標能增進我們對學生動機性目標的瞭解？

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摘 要
成就目標理論乃是去瞭解學習動機的一個主要理論。此理論集中於成就目標和表現目標作為主要概念，但是，忽略了社會目標對學生學習的影響。此研究旨在瞭解不同類型的社會目標（社會聯繫和社會關注目標）對教育結果的影響。結果發現，即使除去成就目標和表現目標的影響，社會目標仍能顯著地解說學習興趣。結果表明，社會關注目標是一種有助適應的社會目標。

關鍵詞：成就目標、社會目標、學習動機