Investigating the link between social goals and learning strategies

Ronnel B King, The University of Hong Kong
Dennis M. McInerney
David A. Watkins

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Ronnel B. King  
*The University of Hong Kong*

Dennis M. McInerney  
*Hong Kong Institute of Education*

David A. Watkins  
*The University of Hong Kong*

**Abstract:** Research in cross-cultural psychology has indicated that people from different cultures are motivated by different types of goals. In collectivist cultures, the power of social goals may be especially salient. However, studies on student motivation usually focus only on two types of goals: mastery and performance goals, thus neglecting the potential role of social goals. The aim of the present study was to investigate how different types of social goals, i.e. social affiliation, social approval, social concern, and social status goals were related to learning strategies in a collectivist culture. 697 secondary students from Hong Kong answered the relevant questionnaires. Results indicated that social concern and social status goals were the most adaptive type of social goal. Implications are discussed.

**Introduction**

Achievement goal theory has become a dominant paradigm for examining student motivation (see Covington, 2000; Elliot, 2005; Maehr & Zusho, 2009 for reviews). However, a weakness of this body of research, particularly that emanating from goal theory, is that it limits itself to examining two types of goals, usually mastery and performance goals, while failing to account for social goals, which may also be powerful constructs in explaining student motivation. This might prove constricting given that research has shown that students pursue multiple goals in the classrooms (Boekaerts, 2009) and that schools are inherently social domains (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Moreover, this limitation is even more glaring in the collectivist Chinese cultural context where academic motivation is inherently social (Yu & Yang, 1994). A better model for examining a range of goals and their potential impacts is Personal Investment Theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986; Maehr & McInerney, 2004) which posits a broader range of goals including task, ego, social solidarity and extrinsic goals, with the latter three having a social dimension.

The main aim of the present paper is to examine how four different types of social goals (social affiliation, social approval, social concern, and social status) drawn from Personal Investment Theory influence adaptive and less adaptive learning strategies (deep, surface, and achieving) in a collectivist non-Western context.

**Method**

The respondents were 697 Hong Kong secondary school children. To measure their social goals and learning strategies, the students were given two self-report instruments: the Chinese versions of the Inventory of School Motivation (ISM-C) (Watkins, McInerney, & Lee, 2002) and the Learning Process Questionnaire (LPQ, Biggs, 1992).
**Social goals.** Four types of social goals were measured using the different subscales of the ISM-C:

- **Social Affiliation:** Interest in belonging to a group when doing schoolwork (e.g. “I can do my best work at school when I work with others.”)
- **Social Approval:** Seeking praise and recognition for schoolwork (e.g. “At school I work best when I am praised.”)
- **Social Concern:** Concern for other students and a willingness to help them with their schoolwork (e.g. “It is very important for students to help each other at school.”)
- **Social Status:** Seeking social power and status through schoolwork (e.g. “I work hard at school to be put in charge of a group.”)

**Learning strategies.** Three types of learning strategies were measured using the LPQ:

- **Deep Strategies:** Understanding what is to be learnt through inter-relating ideas and reading widely (e.g. “I try to relate what I learn in one subject to what I have learned in other subjects.”).
- **Surface Strategies:** Reproducing bare essentials often using rote learning (e.g. “In most subjects I try to do enough just to make sure I pass, and no more.”).
- **Achieving Strategies:** Securing high performance by using regulatory schemes like study skills, time management, and exam-oriented techniques (e.g. “When a test is returned, I correct all the errors I made and try to understand why I made them.”).

In the preliminary analysis, we first examined the descriptive statistics and alpha estimate of internal consistency for each scale. We used structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the relationship between social goals and learning strategies with social goals as predictors. We began by establishing the measurement portion of the model within a CFA framework (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) and then proceeded to the full SEM.

**Results**

The internal consistencies ($\alpha$) of all measures were all acceptable (range of $\alpha = .66 -.84$) except for the surface strategies scale ($\alpha = .54$). The measurement model indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2$/Df = 2.70, $p < .001$, CFI = .922, TLI = .903, RMSEA = .049). The correlations show that almost all the social goals were unrelated to surface learning strategies, while being positively related to both deep and achieving learning strategies.

Personal Investment Theory claims that students’ goals are proximal predictors of various learning strategies and other educational outcomes (see Maehr & McInerney, 2004; McInerney & Liem, 2009; Watkins, McInerney, & Boholst, 2003; Watkins, McInerney, & Lee, 2002; Watkins, McInerney, Lee, Akande, & Regmi, 2002). Consistent with this line of reasoning, we hypothesized that social goals would act as predictors of different learning strategies. We first tested a model where all the social goals had paths going to the three types of learning strategies.

Results indicated that Model 1 ($\chi^2$/Df = 2.704, $p < .001$, CFI = .922, TLI = .903, RMSEA = .049) fit the data well; however there were some non-significant paths. We deleted these non-significant paths and came up with Model 2 ($\chi^2$/Df = 2.656, $p < .001$, CFI = .921, TLI = .905, RMSEA = .049). Since Model 2 was nested within Model 1, we performed a chi-square difference test (Loehlin, 2004). Results indicated that Model 2 was not significantly
different from Model 1 (change in $\chi^2 = 10.545$, change in df = 7, p = .59), thus we adopt Model 2 since it is more parsimonious.

The final model indicates that social concern goals are positive predictors of deep and achieving strategies and negative predictors of surface learning strategies. Social status goals are positive predictors of deep and achieving strategies. Social affiliation and social approval goals were not significant predictors of any of the learning strategies.

![Diagram of social goals and learning strategies](image)

Figure 1. Final model for the relationship between social goals and learning strategies
Estimates are standardized. Indicator variables, error variables, and correlations between error variables are not represented in order to simplify the presentation. Note: ***$p < .001$.

**Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to explore how different types of social goals are related to various adaptive and less adaptive learning strategies. The results are interesting in that social concern and social status goals were positively related to deep and achieving strategies and social concern negatively related to surface strategies. Apart from this latter finding no other social goal was related to surface strategies. It was also interesting that neither social approval nor social affiliation goals were related to any of the learning strategies. Of the social goals considered, two appear to exert a proximal influence on the learning strategies that students adopt, which is particularly important since the strategies that students use influence the quality of learning outcomes.

These findings will be elaborated upon in the paper presentation, with implications for practice and further research being drawn. Social goal research is still in its infancy, and there is a need to devote more attention to this, especially since social concerns form an important part of adolescents’ life. Moreover, social goals may also be more salient for students in collectivist cultures. Dowson and McInerney (2001, p. 40) raises an intriguing possibility that
“Social goals may actually be more salient and predictive of students' global motivation and achievement than either mastery or performance goals. In other words, it is possible that researchers have got it wrong in putting the emphasis on mastery and performance goals.”

References


