



**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

**The Moderating Role of Classroom Goal Structure in the  
Relationship between Students' Academic and Social  
Achievement Goals**

Shira Amit

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master's Degree in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2016

## **Abstract**

Achievement Goal Theory is one of the major theories in the field of educational motivation research. It specifies the goals that underpin students' intentions to engage in, choose, and pursue different learning activities, especially those within the classroom (e.g., Ames, 1992b; Dweck & Elliott, 1983). It is common to differentiate three types of Personal Achievement Goals: (a) Mastery goal, in which the purpose is to learn new knowledge or a skill; (b) Performance-Approach goal, in which the purpose is to demonstrate superior abilities, relative to others; and (c) Performance-Avoidance goal, in which the purpose is to avoid demonstrating lack of abilities. The use of these achievement goals is normally related to the educational field, but has been expended to the social field as well, as it was found that its theoretic structure is relevant within a social context (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008).

The classroom serves as an achievement-related context, both educationally and socially. Different aspects of the classroom, including practices and approaches taken by teachers, influence the prominence of certain achievement goals over others, which lead to those goals being adopted by students (Ames, 1992a; Urdan & Midgley, 2003). Using these practices, as well as implicit messages, teachers construct a Classroom Goal Structure, which promotes a certain achievement goal over another. In a Mastery goal structure classroom, the teacher not only conveys messages and uses practices that prioritize diligence and learning, but also promotes understanding and emphasizes that all students have the potential to achieve success. On the other hand, in a Performance goal structure classroom, the teacher communicates that success equates to extrinsic rewards, and emphasizes the importance of high ability, outperforming others, and that the purpose of academic work is to demonstrate competence.

The objective of this study was to observe the relationships between a classroom goal structure and students' academic and social achievement goals. In particular, I have examined the way that a classroom goal structure, as perceived by students, moderates the relationship between the achievement goals they hold, in two different domains: academic and social.

The novelty of the study lies in linking academic, social and contextual variables, and examining the interaction between them. Furthermore, this study used a statistic analysis model, which takes into consideration two levels of measurement: student-level and class-level. This multi-level analysis enables a better understanding of the contextual characteristics that influence personal motivation among students.

The first research question dealt with the associations between the three types of academic achievement goals and the three compatible types of social achievement goals. The second and third research questions involved the relations between two types of classroom goal structures and their matching academic and social achievement goals, separately. The fourth research question concerned with the interaction between a classroom goal structure and social and academic achievement goals, and in particular, with the way that a classroom goal structure moderates the relationship between the two domains of achievement goals.

**Research Hypotheses:** First, it was hypothesized that there will be positive correlations between academic achievement goals and their compatible social goals. Second, it was hypothesized that there will be positive correlations between the two types of classroom goal structures and their matching academic achievement goals. Third, it was hypothesized that there will be positive correlations between the two types of classroom goal structure and their matching social achievement goals. Fourth, it was hypothesized that a classroom goal structure will moderate the relations between students'

academic and social achievement goals. The last hypothesis was explorative, that is to say, without assuming the direction of the relations and the interactions.

**Participants:** The sample included 760 elementary and middle school students (ages 11-13), nested within 28 different classes (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades), in non-religious state-schools located in the center of Israel.

**Instruments:** Using the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS), students reported their academic achievements goals and their perceived classroom goal structure. Social achievement goals were measured using a previously validated scale (Ryan & Shim, 2006). In addition, students reported their gender, age, and self-evaluation of academic achievements.

**Research Procedure:** Students were asked to individually complete the questionnaires, during classroom hours. The research was conducted during the middle of the school year.

**Results:** Confirmatory factor analysis supported the hypothesized structure of the scales. Then, the first step of data analysis was calculating Person's correlation coefficients between the variables in this study. Consistent with the first hypothesis, significant positive correlations were found between the three types of academic achievement goals and their equivalent social achievement goals. Meaning, students who adopt a certain achievement goal in the academic domain, tend to adopt the same matching goal in the social domain.

In accordance with the second hypothesis, positive significant correlations were found between the two types of classroom goal structures and the matching types of academic achievement goals. Likewise, positive significant correlations were found between the two types of classroom goal structures and the matching types of social

achievement goals, as expected by the third hypothesis. These findings suggest that when students perceive their teachers' instructional approach to be Mastery oriented, i.e., emphasizing learning and ability development, they adopt Mastery and Development achievement goals. On the other hand, when students perceive their classroom environment as Performance oriented, i.e., stressing competence and social comparison, they tend to adopt performance achievement goals, both in the academic and the social domains.

A Two-Level Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) analysis was conducted in order to examine the fourth research hypothesis. This analysis combined the student-level variables (academic and social achievement goals) and the class-level variables (classroom goal structure), and tested the interaction between them. Results show four statistically significant interactions:

(1) between mastery goal structure and social development goal, on academic mastery goal;

(2) between mastery goal structure and social demonstration approach goal, on academic mastery goal;

(3) between mastery goal structure and social demonstration approach goal, on academic performance avoidance goal;

(4) between performance goal structure and social demonstration approach goal, on academic performance avoidance goal.

These interactions indicated that by emphasizing messages of learning and development, the teacher is able to construct a classroom goal structure in a way that will weaken negative relations between certain achievement goals (i.e. academic mastery goal and social demonstration approach goal), and even turn them into positive ones. However, results show that a classroom goal structure, either mastery or performance

oriented, has a similar role in moderating the relationship between social demonstration approach goal and academic performance avoidance goal. In other words, according to the student's perception, in either approach, the teacher's practices reduce the association between these achievement goals. These findings highlight the importance of teachers' motivational messages in promoting adaptive motivational patterns among students, socially and academically, as conveyed through the teachers' practices and policies inside the classroom.

Furthermore, results also revealed a number of main effects: social development goal was positively related to academic mastery goal; social demonstration approach was positively related to both types of academic performance goals (approach and avoidance); and social demonstration avoidance goal was positively related to each type of the three academic goals. Additionally, the self-report measure of school achievements was positively related to academic mastery goal and to academic performance approach goal, and negatively related to academic performance avoidance goal.

The different findings of this research highlight the importance of teachers' messages and practices in promoting and strengthening adaptive motivational patterns among students, academically and socially. They also provide essential information for educators, parents and policy makers, regarding the importance of motivational processes in optimal academic and social development, and concerning the role of teachers in promoting these processes.

Further research should explore the social aspect of teachers' practices in the classroom, in addition to the educational role. It is also recommended to examine teachers' perceptions regarding the achievement goals they believe they promote, compared to what students perceive. Additionally, when examining the interaction between contextual variables and personal variables, it is crucial to use a multi-level analysis, which produces much more thorough conclusions. In order to learn more about causativeness and to observe changes in adopting achievement goals over time, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study