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PREVIEW

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GOAL ORIENTATIONS

by

Marcia F. Reisetter

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Interdepartmental Area of
Major: Psychological and Cultural Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Gregory Schraw

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DISSERTATION TITLE

A Qualitative Study of Goal Orientations

BY

Marcia F. Reisetter

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

Signature

Gregory Schraw

Typed Name

Gregory Schraw

Signature

Ellen Weissinger

Typed Name

Ellen Weissinger

Signature

Roger Bruning

Typed Name

Roger Bruning

Signature

Marilyn Grady

Typed Name

Marilyn Grady

Signature

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF GOAL ORIENTATIONS

Marcia F. Reisetter, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1997

Advisor: Gregory Schraw

Goal Orientation theory is a well-documented construct of motivation and its usefulness has been established by a number of studies. According to previous research, individuals who are high in either mastery or performance orientations exhibit particular characteristics based on their beliefs about the purposes of learning and about themselves in relation to the learning process. Correlational studies consistently link these beliefs to typical academic behaviors including different levels of engagement, commitment and persistence. Those who are mastery oriented are inclined to engage more deeply and persist in difficult tasks than those who hold a performance orientation. Recent studies have indicated that some learners can hold both sets of goal orientations, choosing to emphasize one or the other depending on how they perceive a learning situation resulting in four possible goal configurations. To date, there have been few studies that attempt to understand how these orientations influence the thinking and perceptions of learners as they approach challenging academic tasks. Although correlational studies have consistently revealed relationships of attitudes and perceptions to goal orientations, there is little first hand information about how these different learners describe their approaches to academic challenge and what is important to them in the learning process.

This qualitative study, based on interviews with twenty university students, describes their academic experiences and enriches the composite pictures of learners who fit in the four goal configurations formed by the two axes of mastery and performance orientations. Use of a combination of phenomenology and grounded theory

methodology created dynamic pictures of the experiences of these learners and revealed consistent patterns that supported goal orientations as lens through which to view contrasting perceptions of academic challenge and responses to it.

Goal orientations were shown to organize qualitatively different academic realities for college students. Six themes emerged to describe these contrasting realities, including (1) the multi-dimensional nature of goals, (2) the importance of situation and context, (3) the links between beliefs and behaviors, (4) the role of teachers, (5) the interplay of interest and affect, and (6) the importance of families in determining goal orientation. Some of these themes confirmed existing data and others diverged from existing research and raised questions for further study.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Social-cognitive motivation studies have increased significantly in the last decade, both in number and in scope. These studies consider the significant role of learners' beliefs about themselves and their abilities as they interact with the social and situational aspects that they perceive to be salient in a given task. Approaches that are social-cognitive in nature consider the context of motivation and address the complexity of factors that result in students who are motivated to learn.

Perhaps the most powerful current construct of motivation and one that holds much potential for representing a holistic view of how a motivated learner functions in contrast to an unmotivated one was first presented by Dweck and Leggett (1988). According to this construct, a person's implicit theory of intelligence leads to interpretations of events that trigger qualitatively different cognitive, affective and behavioral responses. Learners believe either that intelligence is a fixed entity or that it is by nature incremental and open to development and change. These two contrasting beliefs about intelligence are presumed to have an effect on the nature of the goals that learners adopt; entity theorists are inclined to adopt *performance* goals and incremental theorists adopt *mastery* goals. These goal differences are relevant to all phases of motivation and influence willingness to engage in a task, to commit necessary effort and resources, and to persist when difficulties arise. The differences become most obvious when a task is challenging.

Extensive research has revealed evidence of patterns of beliefs, goals, and behaviors for individuals who operate from these different goal orientations. Those who adopt performance goals engage, persist, and evaluate their success on a task very differently from those who are in pursuit of mastery goals. These different considerations

and decisions are systematic and predictable. Studies indicate that there are constellations of beliefs, goals and behaviors that relate to each other in significant ways, and these relationships apparently have little to do with actual competence (see Horn, Bruning, Schraw, Curry, & Katkanant, 1993; Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993) . It is possible to describe the patterns and to theoretically project the typical responses of these different learners to academic tasks. Research describes the two contrasting goal orientation patterns.

Individuals who are primarily motivated by performance goals believe that they are supplied with a limited, fixed amount of ability. These learners hold entity theories of intelligence and see ability as a personal quality that cannot be changed. They are concerned with performing for others and with proving to themselves that their innate level of ability is adequate. For these learners, every task has the potential of demonstrating competence or of revealing a lack of it. Beliefs about self worth are confirmed by their performance on the task. Failure is blamed on lack of intelligence and reflective of personal inadequacy. These individuals have to be assured that the chances for success are quite high before they choose to engage in a task. Engagement results when they are certain that it offers them a chance to demonstrate competence and poses minimal threat to self esteem. These learners are said to be motivated by performance goals because they have to perform the task as defined to a level that testifies to their ability.

Learners who adopt performance goals may not approach tasks thoughtfully or with value for the task itself. Instead, they tend to focus on completion of the requirements as they understand them. These learners are constantly aware of how their own performance compares to the performance of others. They do not rely on effective learning strategies to achieve their own mastery of a subject, but instead apply

superficial study strategies that they think will allow them to meet the requirements of the task as described by their teachers. They do not like to ask for help because they perceive asking for help as an indicator of low ability. If at any point it appears that success is unlikely, these learners will engage in a number of evasion tactics and attempt to escape with helpless behavior. They try to shift responsibility for failure from themselves because they see failure as a confirmation of their own perceptions of low ability. They want to avoid public demonstration of their lack of competence. If they cannot overtly refuse to pursue the task, they will withdraw from it by withholding effort since to exert effort and fail would demonstrate that they have low ability. It is better not to try than to try and fail.

Even when they are successful with a task, these learners usually do not go beyond what is expected of them. Those with performance goals operate in a world where others set the standards and supply feedback on the outcomes, and those judgments supply further information for the learners about their fixed ability and personal worth. Performance goal learners are content to allow others to define not only the task itself, but also the parameters of success. Once they have performed according to these expectations, performance oriented learners see the task as complete. They have no reason to go beyond the specific requirements.

The second group of learners is motivated primarily by mastery goals. These learners are incremental theorists who conceive of their intelligence as malleable. Proving worth to others or performing for approval of others is not an issue for them. They assume that they will expand their mastery and skills as they engage in learning tasks, and that their intelligence will grow as they achieve this mastery. Failure is ascribed to lack of effort or poor strategy use rather than to lack of ability and as a necessary part of learning. Typically, mastery-oriented learners welcome challenging tasks as

opportunities to grow, rather than as potential situations to reveal their personal worth. These learners are said to be motivated by mastery goals because their purpose in pursuing academic tasks is to enhance their mastery or skill level. They engage more willingly in difficult tasks because they do not perceive the risk as personally dangerous.

Mastery goal learners are also willing to commit time and effort and to take risks to achieve their goals because they believe that the key to success is effort. When a task becomes difficult, they are not intimidated by the possibility of failure. In fact, Dweck and Leggett (1988) found that these learners do not even think in terms of failure, but perceive set-backs as a signal to re-assess and apply a new approach to a problem. As one would expect, these learners also employ effective self-regulatory and metacognitive strategies and engage in active problem solving. Mastery goal oriented learners are comfortable asking for help when they need it because they do not think of seeking help as an indicator of low ability, but only as one more way to make use of resources as they work their way through the learning task. In short, these learners do not regard failure as a threat to self esteem. They are willing to risk occasional failure as a temporary set-back, which they attribute to lack of effort rather than to lack of ability, and typically expect that they will do better next time when they exert more effort and make better use of learning tools. Even when they deal with failure, they do not internalize it as a comment on their self-worth.

In recent correlational studies the two contrasting goal orientations connect differently to academic achievement (e.g. Greene & Miller, 1996; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Schunk, 1996; Stipek & Gralinski, 1996). Mastery goal orientation has been shown to lead to a pattern that promotes high quality learning engagement and achievement; performance goal orientations are not linked to achievement. Learners are more willing to pursue high quality involvement and deeper levels of processing when

they are in pursuit of mastery goals. Performance goals lead to superficial, minimal engagement and less effort which in turn lead to less achievement.

As different as these two prototypical orientations are, some correlational studies have demonstrated that they are not mutually exclusive (e.g. Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Roedel, Schraw, & Plake, 1994; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Mastery orientation scores on a measure do not affect performance orientation scores, indicating that an individual's goal orientation is multidimensional. This finding implies that while there are many possible goal configurations, there are four basic ones that frame individuals' orientations to a learning task. That is, one can hold high mastery goals *and* high performance goals, be high on one and low in the other, or be low in both orientations. As an illustration, a learner who is high in mastery and low in performance orientation is likely to fit the above description of a mastery-oriented learner. A learner who scores high in a mastery and high in a performance orientation should be interested in increasing personal mastery, but also likes to demonstrate competence to others and the high performance/low mastery learner should fit the performance profile. A learner who is low in both kinds of goal orientations should be difficult to motivate at all.

Studies are consistent in demonstrating what characteristics *should* exist in each of these goal configurations. Theoretically and statistically, the studies presented in the following literature review describe the influence goal orientation has on beliefs about the nature of intelligence, engagement, self-regulated behavior, persistence, and achievement. There is every reason to believe that people within the four major goal configurations have significantly different academic experiences as a function of their goal orientations.

Those who study goal orientations and motivation know from the existing studies that individuals in each of these configurations are different in important ways. We know

what they do; we do not know *why* they do it. For example, there is ample evidence that learners who are high in mastery orientation choose to use more and better learning strategies (e.g. Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Schunk, 1996). But why is that true? What do they think about and what do they consider when they decide to put forth that extra effort? What factors make the critical differences? We also know what these different learners *should* say about their value for academic tasks and their purposes for learning but we do not know what, in fact, they *do* say. According to existing research, a mastery oriented learner should make more statements about the value of effort, about self-efficacy and self-determination. Is that the case? Where did these characteristics originate, how they are maintained, and how aware are individual learners are of their own motivation orientations in relation to their personal theories of achievement? How would these different individuals explain why they are the learners they have become? The correlational research about the existence of the connections is convincing, but so far we have no picture of these different experiences from the view of those who live within them.

Interviews of individuals classified within the four basic goal configurations can offer insights into the actual working of the motivation process. When goal orientations serve as the initial categories, interviews with these individuals should uncover distinctively different reasoning processes and motivational constellations consistent with the correlational evidence. First-hand descriptions of motivation experiences of students living in an academic setting can enrich and enhance the existing picture of goal orientations.

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of individuals who frame academic experiences within these four different goal configurations. The information is intended to enrich the composite picture of how goal orientation influences learners'

responses to academic challenge, based on their perceptions of the nature and purpose of learning. In this study, 144 students completed a survey that placed them within one of the four quadrants. Twenty students were then purposefully selected for interviews, five from each of the four goal configurations. The interviews were conducted with researcher knowledge of quadrant designation and focused on how each individual in the respective configurations described and explained his or her approach to challenging academic situations. Participants were also asked to describe their goals for learning, origins and influences on their goal orientations, the amount of control they believe they have over their own success and failure, and their use of learning strategies. Responses to these questions, taken together, illuminated the existing picture of goal orientation theory. The responses also raised new questions about goal orientation theory.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Motivation in a broad sense is the process whereby goal directed behavior is instigated and sustained (Boekaerts, 1992). Few people would argue with such a broad perspective. Controversy arises, however, when we try to understand *why* students choose to exert effort to achieve particular goals, or conversely, refuse to do so.

Motivation is no longer considered a behavioral construct, nor is it a simple cognitive one. Much recent research has been conducted within a social-cognitive paradigm that considers how the characteristics and experiences an individual brings to a task interact with his or her interpretation of the learning situation and expectations for success (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993). This approach expands understanding motivation to include the subjective dimensions and feelings that individuals bring to a task, and incorporates perceptions of the self in relation to perceptions of the environment (Boekaerts, 1991). A social-cognitive approach to motivation considers the process as a personal, social, and contextual mix that interacts with the cognitive dimensions of a task. This complex combination of factors determines motivation levels. The picture is further complicated by the different perspectives researchers take to reveal more about each of the factors. Although the individual constructs have been studied extensively and there is correlational evidence that the dimensions fit together in some kind of relationship, there is little information to describe the dynamic of the interaction. As a result, educators understand a good deal about individual elements of motivation, but unfortunately have no way to connect them explicitly.

Because it draws on studies that make connections between individual differences and perceptions with motivated behaviors, goal theory represents a coherent

way to think about motivation and classroom environments (Blumenfeld, 1992). Goal orientations that describe learners' perspectives of academic achievement addresses issues about the quality of learning and depth of processing based on an analysis of the *kinds* of goals learners hold and the sources of these goal orientations. Achievement goals have been variously contrasted as extrinsically or intrinsically directed, success or failure oriented, task or ego focused, and mastery or performance directed (Boekaerts, 1992). Regardless of how they are dichotomized, these contrasts all address the questions of engagement, commitment, and persistence in an academic task in terms of the learners' value for the task and their expectations of success in accomplishing it. As such, the motivation perspective framed by a study of goal orientations has the potential to serve as a base for connecting the constructs. According to Dweck and Leggett (1988)

The goal framework may tie together and organize various constructs in the literature that have been proposed to account for performance impairments or enhancement, including attributional patterns, defensive strategies, self versus task focus, ego versus task involvement, evaluation anxiety, and intrinsic motivation. That is, the present conceptualization may provide a way to illuminate the origins and dynamics of these processes within a single system. (p. 262).

In this literature review, I will describe the extent, nature, and findings of the current research on Dweck and Leggett's theory of goal orientations.

Goal Orientation Theory

An influential study that connected implicit theories of intelligence with different kinds of achievement goals and academic behaviors was conducted by Dweck and Leggett (1988). These researchers began by investigating two distinct patterns of response to challenging tasks, one that they characterized as a "helpless" response, and

another that they described as "mastery-oriented," terms they drew from a series of studies conducted by Diener and Dweck (1978). Dweck and Leggett found that when children were given less challenging academic tasks, ones in which all were easily successful, there was little difference in their responses. However, when children were faced with failure, distinctly different patterns of behavior emerged. Helpless children made statements that referred to their personal inadequacy, expressed negative feelings such as anxiety and boredom with the task, engaged in diversionary task-irrelevant behavior, and performed at an increasingly impaired level. They did not concentrate their resources or their efforts, and instead evidenced self-protection maneuvers to hide their own perceptions, which were not necessarily accurate, of their lack of ability.

Children who were mastery-oriented responded to difficulties differently, appearing not to consider these problems as failures, but as challenges to be addressed. They examined their initial approaches, expressed optimism, and had positive perceptions of the task and their abilities to perform it with more effort. These children maintained their concentration and tried different approaches until they were successful. They exhibited inclinations for self-regulation, positive affect, and useful problem-solving strategies (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Dweck and Leggett (1988) hypothesized that the mastery-oriented and the helpless children pursued very different goals for learning. They labeled these different goals performance goals for helpless children, aimed at establishing a claim to adequate ability, and learning goals for mastery-oriented individuals, aimed at increasing competence and abilities. Their analysis allowed them to consider the mechanisms by which these goals create patterns of response and to account for these responses in psychological terms.

...the performance goal focuses the individual on judgments of ability and can set in motion cognitive and affective processes that render that individual vulnerable to maladaptive behavior patterns, whereas the learning goal creates a focus on increasing ability and sets in motion cognitive and affective processes that promote adaptive challenge seeking, persistence, and sustained performance in the face of difficulty (p. 262).

The model Dweck and Leggett created demonstrates that goal orientation influences cognitions and task choice, affect, and achievement behaviors, implicit theories of intelligence, social behavior and moral judgments. These related beliefs determine whether individuals will be inclined to pursue goals that document their fixed ability or those that allow them to develop their ability. It may, therefore, be at the heart of maladaptive or adaptive motivational patterns.

Further studies have illuminated various dimensions of this model. Some of these studies have been done with young children to try to determine at what age mastery or performance orientations become salient. Smiley and Dweck (1992) were interested in investigating the possible existence of helpless and mastery responses in young children to determine if developmental inability to deal with abstractions held true as expected. Four- and five-year-old children were categorized as preferring either mastery or performance goals based on their preferences for tasks that were either challenging or non-challenging. The researchers were interested in verifying the relationship between goal choice and task level choice and in connecting these elements to degree of confidence in these learners. Children were first given an age appropriate puzzle to solve and then asked to evaluate their puzzle solving ability. Following their evaluations, they were asked to solve another, somewhat different puzzle. In the second session,

three to four weeks later, the same students were given four puzzles, three that were unsolvable and one that was not. During this session, students rated their emotions and their expectations for future success. They were then invited to select another puzzle to work on and to explain their choices and their goals for completion of it. Results indicated that children who held performance goals were hesitant in stating their goals and were unsure of achieving them. Mastery goal children, in contrast, stated higher goals and engaged in an attempt to achieve them. Goal orientation was shown to be a good predictor of level of concern with adequate performance, degree of task engagement, and the emotions that children reported when they failed. The differences these children demonstrated in task confidence and their assessment of their ability after failure also supported the goal orientation framework. Children with performance goals in this study demonstrated serious interest in predictable, positive, outcomes, regardless of the nature of the task. Smiley and Dweck found that young children as a whole responded to failure in much the same way as older children, and that the goal orientation framework could categorize these differences. The study raised questions about the level of cognitive processing necessary to make inferences about the nature of ability and intelligence and about the nature of these inferences themselves. The four- and five-year-olds in this study were shown to have internalized and allied with an emphasis on either external evaluation of products of learning *or* commitment to the learning process. They began school with an inclination for selecting consistent goal orientations.

In a similar study, Cain and Dweck (1995) compared students in first, third and fifth grade to determine if younger children's motivational patterns include inferences about ability that are related to fixed or malleable orientations. These students were interviewed twice, once to determine their implicit theories of intelligence and once as they attempted to solve difficult puzzles. Cain and Dweck found that some dimensions of

the belief constellations that have previously been found typical of older children were already present by first grade, but other dimensions were not related until fifth grade. Apparently, individuals of both goal orientations have a stable dimension to their understanding of the nature of ability, and both groups also consider that to a degree, intelligence is acquirable. It was clear in this study, however, that entity theorists emphasized the capacity dimension over the acquirability dimension. Those characteristics that did exist early seemed to connect to particular cognitive motivation patterns evident in older children. The study also supported previous developmental research findings, indicating that although younger children are less susceptible to helplessness, motivational difficulties occur for young children who do fit in that pattern. The researchers suggest that the different ways in which children consider ability and achievement direct their motivation orientations as they progress through school.

Individual theories that link perceptions of the nature of intelligence and goal orientation have some form by third grade. Bempchat, London, and Dweck (1991) demonstrated that by that time some children already hold either incremental or entity theories of intelligence, and by fifth grade they are inclined to use these theories to judge the performance of others. In their first study, children from kindergarten through fifth grade were interviewed individually to assess their theories about the nature of intelligence, social interactions, physical skills, and physical appearance, and their responses were classified as representing an entity or an incremental theory. In a following session, third through fifth graders performed a problem solving task designed to assess their responses to failure. An upper limit of capability was established, and then children were given three tasks that could not be solved. When the children failed, the researchers gave them more tasks at the level of their previous success. They were told that the previous tasks had been very difficult. Comments made by these children

indicated the kinds of theories they had made a difference in show they recovered from failure. It took longer for those with entity theories to solve problems after failure than it did for those with incremental theories.

In their second study Bempechat et al. (1991) demonstrated that attention in a learning context can be focused on one kind of goal or the other. In experimentally induced situations, children who were directed to a mastery goal that highlighted an incremental theory were found to be more likely to choose challenging tasks than were those who were directed toward a performance goal that referred to an entity theory. The children in the mastery context were more interested in selecting goals tasks from which they would learn something, rather than those in which they were guaranteed success. In this study, when a task was introduced to students with the emphasis on success depending on fixed ability, maladaptive views of achievement were encouraged. Tasks described as malleable and incremental, with success dependent on effort, led to more adaptive attitudes toward achievement. Different instructional contexts produced different patterns of cognition before and after failure. Bempechat et al. conclude that the way teachers frame a task can have an influence on goal orientations that children select.

Elliott and Dweck (1988) also reached the conclusion that contexts can be created that encourage children to adopt either a performance or mastery orientation to a given task. Their study confirmed that the nature of children's achievement goals is critical in determining whether they demonstrate a helpless or a mastery response when faced with academic challenge. Fifth grade children were placed in four experimentally controlled conditions, divided first by task instructions that emphasized either performance goals that reminded students to consider appearances or mastery goals in which they were reminded that the goal of learning is to increase competence. They were divided again by the kinds of feedback they would receive about their current skill

level as they worked on the task. Elliott and Dweck's study revealed that when value for a performance goal was highlighted, children who perceived that they had low ability responded to failure with a helpless orientation, whereas children who perceived they had high ability demonstrated mastery orientation. In contrast, when the mastery goal was highlighted, beliefs about ability were irrelevant, since these children aimed to increase their competence, regardless of perceived skills. The results of their study support that different kinds of achievement goals initiate a different pattern of responses that control cognitions, inferences, affective and behavioral dimensions. Each goal "creates and organizes its own world--each evoking different thoughts and emotions and calling forth different behaviors" (Elliott & Dweck, 1988, p. 11).

Comparisons of students who highlight either a mastery or performance goal frequently reveal that those operating from a mastery orientation are more inclined to exert effort in the form of self-regulated learning strategies. Schunk (1996) conducted two studies to investigate the effect of goal orientation and perceived ability on motivation and achievement outcomes. Both studies aimed at exploration of how self-regulatory processes operate as children learn cognitive skills. The initial study was designed to test the idea that mastery and performance goals exert different motivational patterns and achievement outcomes, even when the products of the task assigned are intended to be the same. Fourth grade students learning a particular math skill were given a pretest that placed them in four goal orientations--task, ego, affiliative, and work avoidant--that measured their self-efficacy, and their skill and persistence level. These students were then randomly divided into four treatment groups with combinations of mastery goals vs. performance goals and self evaluation vs. no self evaluation emphasis. They were then instructed in the math content. Schunk hypothesized that students with mastery goals in combination with an emphasis on skill acquisition and

self-evaluation strategies would learn more because self-evaluation would be consistent with their goal orientations. The results of this study demonstrated the value of holding mastery goals with or without self-evaluative opportunities, and performance goals only when self-evaluative procedures were encouraged.

Schunk's (1996) second study was designed to explore contexts in which learning goals might result in superior achievement. In this study students were divided only by performance and mastery goal groups, and all were given opportunities and instructions for self evaluation. There was evidence that in an instructional setting a goal of learning to solve problems enhances motivation and relates to an increase in self-efficacy, skill development, and development of a mastery goal orientation. The problem-solving goal was enhanced by encouraging students to evaluate their own progress and achievement.

Newman and Schwager (1995) were also interested in how individuals monitor and regulate their learning process. They investigated the different degrees of help-seeking that are connected with adoption of performance or mastery goals, seeking to determine what kind of motivational orientations lead to what they termed "adaptive help seeking" (p. 354). In previous motivation research, help seeking was connected to self-regulated learning for students operating with mastery goals, which serves them as another way to master content (Ames & Archer, 1988). Individuals operating with performance goals, however, may perceive help-seeking as indicative of low ability reflecting inadequate competence (Ames & Archer, 1988). Newman and Schwager state that this is particularly true for older children who see asking for help as a source of embarrassment and a potential threat to self-worth. They predicted that adaptiveness depends on grade, goals, achievement, and interactional context that governs particular academic settings. In this study, math achievement scores were obtained for children in