Goal Theory Is *Not* Dead—Not Yet, Anyway: A Reflection on the Special Issue

Martin L. Maehr[1,2]

The author suggests how these papers converge in portraying the nature of motivation, learning, and achievement. That portrayal proceeds from a social— cognitive framework that stresses the centrality of goals in framing whether, when, and how students are likely to approach or avoid academic tasks. He points out, however, that approach and avoidance, although an important aspect of motivation, do not fully encompass a domain that is and has been considered the fitting purview of motivation theory and research. Especially in the realm of education, the quality *of engagement that eventuates is of equal if not greater importance relative to choice and direction. However, a primary question raised in these comments relates to the nature of goals and how they operate in framing action, thought,* and *feelings. Some of the work reflected in the wider goal theory literature as well as in some of these papers, suggests that goals are closely linked to a varying role of* self *in determining the nature and direction of action, feelings, and thought. Some of the work seems to limit goals to a specific kind of objective under limited circumstances. Finally, questions are raised about whether or how the work presented would define the role of context in determining motivation. Clearly, although work reflected in these papers is truly impressive, it is impressive not just for conclusions reached but also for new questions prompted.*

KEY WORDS: goals; self; engagement; context.

[1]University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109.
[2]Correspondence should be addressed to Martin L. Maehr, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109.

INTRODUCTION

Now, as much as ever, achievement is a topic of prime social, political, and educational significance. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand and create an economically viable, let alone "achieving," society without considering motivation. Workers have to *invest* in the jobs to be done in order to create and contribute. Students cannot be passive in school if they are to develop skills and orientations that permit them to become fully functioning members of the contemporary world. And, in this and probably every society, questions about why this or that group or person does or doesn't perform up to this or that standard or expectation, are regularly raised. So, achievement and, directly and indirectly, "achievement motivation" is and likely will remain a focal issue. As such, it will not quickly disappear from the research agendas of educators, psychologists, and other social scientists.

Explaining, predicting, maintaining, enhancing, and especially creating motivation is a challenge not easily met. Collectively, the papers in this special issue each represent statements that are based on and accurately represent major research programs at the heart of the current understanding of motivation and achievement. And, collectively and individually authors speak effectively to issues of psychological theory as well as to matters of educational practice. And, as a totality, they succeed in doing more than summing up recent history. They lay the groundwork for a changed future. Broadly speaking, articles in this special issue emerge from a common tradition and share a similar perspective. It is a cognitive perspective in which goals, in particular, but also sense of self, play major roles. There is little in these papers that would suggest that this perspective no longer holds merit, but there is much that suggests that some essential rethinking is in order regarding how educators conceptualize motivation in the future.

In this reflection on what was earlier a lively oral discussion,[3] now reified in print, I follow three paths. First, I recognize and comment on the extensive empirical and theoretical work that serves as the foundation for these papers. Second, I examine each of the papers separately in terms of how they enhance goal theory and motivation theory generally. With that, I suggest specifically how they may complement each other in contributing to an overall model of motivation. Third, I consider what may be lacking here and elsewhere so far as motivation theory is concerned, and I suggest directions for future work.

---

[3]As noted elsewhere, these papers are based on a symposium at the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1999.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Background

Two decades or so ago, attention was drawn to the importance of *purpose* in determining the direction, nature, and "quality" of action taken, especially in achievement situations. Early ruminations associated with this perspective were found in the work of a number of scholars whose work is amply referenced in the papers that compose this symposium. Within a decade, "goal theory" was declared a major new perspective by someone who had played a prime role in launching a cognitive revolution in the study of motivation (Weiner, 1990). Today, there is little doubt that goal theory is a prominent—if not the dominant—perspective on achievement, certainly the preeminent perspective in the study of achievement in educational settings. All but one of the papers included in this special issue are rooted in a goal theory perspective. The one that is not reflects a tradition that has not only been exploited, but often incorporated, and even "claimed" by goal theorists. Covington's early work on "self-worth" (Covington, 1992) stimulated and framed the contributions of many who worked in the goal theory tradition. And, the work reflected in the Covington and Miller paper deserves special consideration because it reminds readers of the centrality of "meaning" and the role of one's "self" in determining the direction and quality of action, feelings, and thought.

So, if the ideas and results reflected in these papers are an accurate index, motivation remains an active area of research, and goal theory persists as a productive framework for pursuing such research. Having said that, I now comment on the several papers individually and as a whole so far as they can be integrated into a broader understanding of motivation.

A Shared Framework

In reading a series of papers summing hours of research and thought in different laboratories focusing on varying dimensions of the topic, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the differences in perspectives and the lack of shared orientations. As I first read these papers, I felt like I was reexperiencing the tale of blind men describing an elephant. After listening patiently and reading more, I came to the opinion that the papers were in fact quite complementary. To assure myself of that fact—and to confirm my sense of understanding—I constructed an underlying causal chain that reveals my view of how this work could be integrated into a fuller understanding of
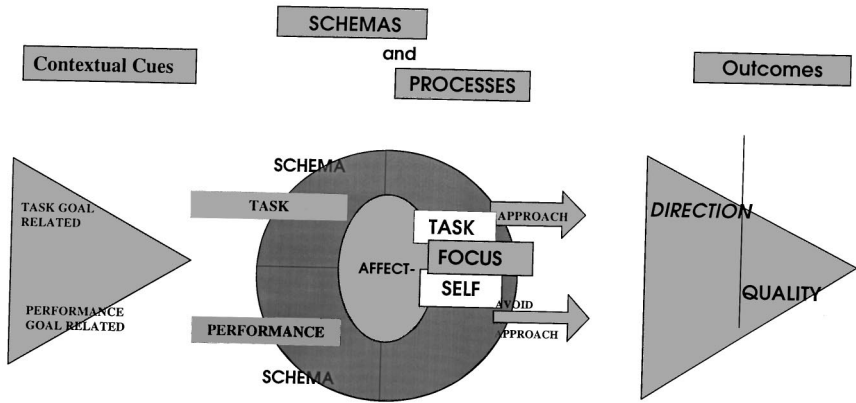
Fig. 1. A possible causal model implicit in the varied papers presented.

achievement motivation (Fig. 1). Although I do not expect everyone to agree with this model, it helped me to separate the place and possible roles of the multiple variables discussed as implied. And, as a visual aid, Fig. 1 may help others to see a degree of complementarity as well as differences, in what the authors are reporting and proposing.

What "Is" Motivation?

On those occasions when I teach an introductory class on "motivation," I find it necessary first to define that term as concretely as possible. I meet that need by asking students what they *see* that makes them say that a person is or is not motivated. Probably in part because of the way that I guide discussions, we somehow get to such things as "choices" to engage or not to engage in a task, persist at it, and exhibit evidence of intensity while doing it. Somewhere along the way we also get to questions about the *quality* of engagement. Students in education regularly ask about variation in output that presumably relates to how students process learning materials. How does motivation relate to "critical thinking," "deep processing," and "creativity"? And, as I push them to operationalize these terms, I learn that they are keen observers of the levels and ways in which individuals engage as well as perform on a task. All of this leads us to a taxonomy of behavioral patterns that motivation theory should endeavor to explain. The simple form of this taxonomy suggests that motivation should first of all deal with the *direction* of behavior: approaching or avoiding or both, in the main. But secondly and not secondarily, it must also be concerned with the *quality*

of behavior and thinking: variation in critical thinking, reflective as well as reflexive responses, and innovative problem solving and creativity.

This special issue as a whole is built around the motivational centrality of approach and avoidance phenomena, and *directionality*. Accordingly, the several papers to varying degree focus on approach and avoidance both as a defining behavior and as a predisposition toward that behavior. Covington and Elliot introduce this theme, and Elliot and Thrash provide a thorough and insightful portrayal of the essential role that approach and avoidance have played and must play in the understanding of motivation—human or animal. The remaining papers mostly discuss the possible effects of goals or other meaning systems in these terms.

Although the approach–avoidance duality may be the first step in the personal investment process, it may not represent the sum and total of what we wish to explain—nor is it a fitting paradigm for explaining it. Indeed, an exclusive focus on directionality could limit the range of motivational variables considered. As even the students in my introductory class insist, "motivation" must embrace much, much more. Once engaged, *how* does the individual think and act? Notably, two of the papers in this symposium are concerned with motivational behavior that appears to represent more than behavioral direction. At the very least, *self-regulation, self-handicapping*, and *help-seeking* represent complicated forms of directional behavior. More vividly, perhaps, narrowing the focus of motivation to approach and avoidance behavior does not readily encourage a consideration of different *ways* of engaging. For example, it seems to exclude "playfulness" (e.g., White, 1959), "creativity" (e.g., Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), and "flow experiences" (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1993). Thus limiting the study of motivation to approach–avoidance tendencies and possibly therewith to directional behavior may be too limiting.

My "bottom line" here is that the approach–avoidance paradigm, although useful in some cases, when applied exclusively could prevent a consideration of the motivational origins of complex thought and action. As such, it would only take psychologists so far in the pursuit of the origins and components of how and under which conditions humans realize their fullest potential. Not only my students but also the motivation literature as a whole in fact already seems to embrace much more than approach–avoidance behavior or orientations do. My suggestion, as portrayed in Fig. 1, is that approach–avoidance "goals" should be seen as alternative objectives determining choice to do or not to do that emerge as individuals interpret the purpose of the activity and ascribe meaning to it in task- and performance goal-terms. Such largely situation-determined goals are basic to the full range of thought, action, and affect—not just to approaching and

avoiding ("Directional Behavior"). One obviously has to engage in order to create. But creativity and reflective thinking (variations in "quality") do not necessarily follow. What follows likely also has motivational origins. Thus, I suggest that the approach–avoidance paradigm has important but probably circumscribed value in explaining human thought and action.

What Is a Goal, Anyway?

The term "goal" is used in a variety of ways in the motivational literature: often to designate a complex set of processes, sometimes to designate specific outcomes. Essentially, Elliot and Thrash define a goal in terms of outcomes; subjectively projected outcomes, to be sure, but outcomes nevertheless. In the case of achievement the demonstration of *competence* is the objective. Competence or achievement can be defined differently, depending on the standards employed. They can also be valenced differently as something to be approached or avoided. This is an elegantly simple definition of goals and is operationally very useful for certain purposes. All but possibly one of the papers that make up this symposium seem to reflect similar thinking. At least, they find the approach–avoidance paradigm useful in predicting the outcomes they consider: choice, persistence, self-handicapping, help seeking, and, ultimately, achievement.

To that closely woven conception of achievement motivation, Covington and Miller introduce a profoundly important and perhaps confounding addition: The *self* they richly portray is essentially at the heart of motivation as it is situated in real-life achievement contexts. And they remind us that the *self* is not just about competence; it is about *worth*, and it is fraught with potential for modifying motivational patterns. From their vivid and convincing portrayal alone it would be difficult to deny this. But there is a mass of evidence from other sources—including previous work associated directly with goal theory—that *self* is at the center of achievement, as well as most social behavior (e.g., Baumeister, 1998). And, the *self* that is at the center of action is not just the competent, efficacious, *attributing* self—although it is certainly that—but the *valued* self. Awareness of one's ability as well as one's identity can undermine or encourage. Probably merely thinking about *self* and one's ability in a situation can be distracting and likely can reduce achievement. However, as thoughts about *self* are often associated with gender and ethnic identities (e.g., Steele and Aronson, 1995), additional reasons for approaching and avoiding an achieving activity are often implicated.

So, I suggest that task and performance *goals* should be thought of as broader interpretive frames ("schemas") that focus the achiever's attention on self (performance goal) or on the activity to be done (task goal). These

can be "primed" by "contextual" cues, though they may be higher or lower so far as readiness of response is concerned. Of course, this central idea can be traced to the earliest discussion of achievement goals, and it is reflected in the terms goal labeling initially employed (e.g., Maehr and Nicholls, 1980). This suggestion may have implications that are not immediately self-evident. For example, it obviously suggests that primary performance goal schemas make the achiever more self-aware, even "self-conscious," leading either to avoidance or approach objectives, depending on the concepts of self the individual holds. We may even surmise, for example, that as the focus on self increases, this could reduce the degree of absorption in a task that is sometimes necessary for creative problem solving. At the least, this interpretation of the nature of goals suggests a potentially interesting tie-in with another lively area of research *and vice versa* (cf. Baumeister, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Given past experience, it is probably too much to expect any psychological theory to persist and remain vigorously influential for more than two decades. By such measure, goal theory is at a critical point. However, wittingly or not, this special issue gives reason to hope that there is still life in this heretofore useful and currently comfortable theoretical framework. The current reexamination of approach–avoidance within a social cognitive framework has served a very useful function. Although these authors tended to focus on their own research, they did manage to cover a lot of ground and cover it well. However, in terms of my taxonomic model (Fig. 1), it is clear that a number of important issues remain to be considered at a later point.

Emotions

A return to the approach–avoidance paradigm might imply a role for *affect*. The paper by Elliot and Thrash alludes to this potential. The Covington and Miller paper actually makes this connection quite explicit, though neither suggests a track that research and theory might take. How do the emotions operate in achievement motivation? McClelland's early (e.g., McClelland *et al.*, 1953) and later (e.g., McClelland, 1985; McClelland *et al.*, 1989) notions seemed to put emotions at the core. Atkinson (e.g., 1957) pointedly specified "*hope* of success" and "*fear* of failure." Weiner (e.g., 1986) likewise specified a role for the emotions within an attribution theory perspective. In contrast, the papers in this collection as well as the perspectives they represent have tended to ignore this facet of the motivational

process. If they energize, how do they do so? If they undermine or confound, why and when? Again, the focus on self and self-worth reinforces the need to rediscover the role of the emotions in motivation.

Context

Throughout this set of papers there are implications that context may be important in determining motivational behavior, but little is said in this regard. Goals presumably can be induced (e.g., Elliot and Thrash). That implies some kind of determining environment. Beyond this, little attention to context as cause or the possibly situated nature of achievement is given in these papers. The question is not just one of applicability to some sort of intervention program, though for educators in particular that *is* a serious concern. On a more theoretical basis, it really has to do with the conception of goals. From where do they come? How do they phase in and out of a person's life?

Goal theory research has at times bundled a variety of concepts and processes together in often confusing ways in order to portray how an individual adopts or holds a goal and then exhibits certain behavior. Some think of goals as a schema that can be "primed." What does that schema all—or necessarily—include? My suggestion (implied in Fig. 1) is that performance goal inductions serve especially to prime self-schemas and thereby to produce the varying approach–avoidance effects found in the case of performance goals. One might read some of my earlier comments suggesting that task and performance goal inductions (and other aspects of the achievement environment) may prime or not prime self-schemas and, thereby, produce the varying effects found in the case of performance goals. Whether or not that suggestion is accepted, perhaps it will highlight further thinking regarding the potential importance of *context* in determining motivation. Achievement motivation research has all too often been oriented toward individual differences. This is reflected in the methods employed in the research conducted by all of the authors in this special issue. However, because achievement as often as not occurs in groups, in the context of others, the effects of these others need to be taken into account. After all, those concerned with enhancing motivation are not so much interested in the historical origins of an established pattern of behavior as on what they can do to enhance achievement in a specific context in a present moment.

So, there is much that needs to be done. Yet, one can scarcely read these papers and not appreciate the accomplishments in this area to date. The wider literature that these papers represent promises a continuing widening of research vistas and a deepening of insights. The area of motivation can

hardly be ignored by practitioners or researchers. Goal theory has and likely will continue to prompt new questions, research, and maybe some conflict. One can only hope so. If these papers are any judge of the state of thinking in the area, not only will motivational issues persist, but theoretical issues covered in these papers will remain the focus of scholarly effort. Goal theory is not dead, even though it may be due for a serious reexamination as well as some reconstruction.

REFERENCES

Amabile, T. M. (1996). *Creativity in Context*, Westview Press/Harper-Collins Boulder, CO.

Atkinson, J. W. (1957). Motivational determinants of risk-taking behavior. *Psychol. Rev.* 64: 359–372.

Baumeister, R. F. (1998). The self. In Gilbert, D. T., Fiske, S. T., and Lindzey, G. (eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th Ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, pp. 680–740.

Covington, M. V. (1992). Making the grade: *A Self-Worth Perspective on Motivation and School Reform*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper Collins, New York.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., and Rathunde, K. (1993). The measurement of flow in everyday life. Toward a theory of emergent motivation. In Jacobs, J. E. (ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Developmental Perspectives on Motivation*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, pp. 57–97.

Maehr, M. L., and Nicholls, J. (1980). Culture and achievement motivation: A second look. In Warren, N. (ed.), *Studies in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 3, Academic Press, New York, pp. 221–267.

McClelland, D. C. (1985). *Human Motivation*, Scott-Foresman, Chicago, IL.

McClelland, D., Atkinson, J. W., Clark, R. A., and Lowell, E. L. (1953). *The Achievement Motive*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York.

McClelland, D. C., Koestner, R., and Weinberger, J. (1989). How do self-attributed and implicit motives differ? *Psychol. Rev.* 96: 690–702.

Steele, C. M., and Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *J. Person. Soc. Psychol.* 69: 797–811.

Weiner, B. (1986). *An Attribution Theory of Motivation and Emotion*, Springer-Verlag, New York.

Weiner, B. (1990). History of motivational research in education. *J. Educ. Psychol.* 82: 616–622.

White, R. W. (1959). Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence. *Psychol. Rev.* 66: 297–333.