

## Concept: Achievement goal theory

### Brief overview of concept:

Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) is a psychological framework that seeks to explain how individuals approach achievement-related tasks and their underlying motivations for doing so (Nicholls, 1984; Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 1999). AGT addresses the complexity of human motivation, and is particularly relevant in educational settings. The theory suggests that individuals are driven by different goals when engaging in achievement-oriented activities, and these goals influence their behaviour, effort, and emotional responses.

AGT highlights the variation of ways in which individuals perceive their own abilities and competence. An individual's perception of their abilities is impacted by their previous high or low performance in that activity (Nicholls, 1984), and their self-comparisons to others' achievements. There are two achievement goal states which determine how individuals define success or mastery: task- and ego-involvement (Harwood, Spray, & Keegan, 2008).

**Task-involvement** (Nicholls, 1984), also referred to as '**learning goal**' (Dweck, 1986) and '**Mastery goal**' (Ames and Archer, 1988), focuses on the individual's motivation to learn, or master an activity, for its own sake. Motivations for this type of goal is typically intrinsic, when the learner has a personal interest in the subject or activity (Jagacinski and Strickland, 2000). In a task-involved state, the learner is focused more on their own performance, and bettering themselves by comparison to an internal standard, rather than comparing their performance with peers or others.

**Ego-involvement** (Nicholls, 1984), also termed '**performance goal**' (Dweck, 1986, Ames and Archer, 1988), focuses on the projection of a learner's abilities onto others. An ego-involvement state involves the learner being motivated by extrinsic factors, such as the need to out-compete others, or to meet a particular externally-set benchmark of competence (Jagacinski and Strickland, 2000). This focus can be towards demonstrating superiority to themselves or others, but the reference point is always external, a comparison to the abilities of others, or benchmarks set by them.

Motivations can also be positive or negative. **Approach Goals** are focused on attaining a positive outcome or demonstrating competence. **Avoidance Goals** are centred on avoiding negative outcomes, such as failure or criticism. Approach goals are set by reflecting on past good performance, and achieving (or exceeding) a set goal. This could be achieving a goal in physical exercise or sport, or gaining high marks/grades in an assessment. Avoidance goals are linked more to a fear of failure, and a lack of confidence in one's own ability. Often this lack of confidence is due to a previous experience where an activity was failed, or a benchmark was not met. In many cases this can be an internal perception of failure, not necessarily an external benchmark.

Individuals may adopt a combination of these goals, and the interplay between task- and ego-involvement (or mastery and performance) goal orientations can be complex (Schneider and Preckel, 2017). AGT acknowledges the role of contextual factors, such as the learning environment and feedback, in shaping individuals' goal orientations. There are also age-related,

with adult learners having different motivations to those of children or young adults (Remedios and Richardson, 2013).

In educational settings, understanding students' achievement goals can have practical implications for teaching strategies, feedback, and overall classroom atmosphere. By fostering a task-involvement-oriented environment, that emphasises the value of learning and effort, educators can potentially enhance students' motivation and performance (Harackiewicz *et al.*, 1998). Two meta-analyses of AGH (Schneider and Preckel, 2017; Bardach *et al.*, 2020) support the impact of AGT-directed activities on student outlooks, outcomes and performance in assessments. What is key to the success of enhancing learning using these concepts, is effective scaffolding of learning activities, and **especially** assessments, to ensure the **intrinsic motivations** are enhanced where possible; this needs to be combined with **approach** goals, rather than avoidance goals, underpinning the learning.

The high focus on student agency with the EAT framework aims to focus development on approach goals and task-involvement/intrinsic motivations. The role of the educator in setting assessments that are meaningful (AD2) and inclusive (AD3), and in which the student feel invested (AD1, AF2 and AF4) is key to the development of a task-involvement attitude. Developing student assessment literacy is also fundamental to task-involvement or Mastery Goals. AL1 (clarifying what 'good' looks like) is an externally-set benchmark (which is more aligned to ego-involvement), but internalising standards of performance, which underpins AF1, enhances self-comparison, and task-involvement approaches.

By making assessment a key part of the learning process, and a positive experience whereby the student can benchmark their own progress, enhances an 'approach goal' orientation, and the learner wanting to do well for their own motivation. Assessment of learning, potentially as a stress-inducing process, or one where the learner is being forced to 'prove' their abilities to an assessor, removes that motivation to an external driver, and means that the learner is trying to avoid failing, rather than trying to achieve success.

Feedback has a particularly strong impact on achievement goals. Motivating feedback which encourages more effort and engagement (AF1), as does the use of peer-feedback (AF3) and self-feedback (AF4). The aims of these latter two are to enhance the learner's own self-criticism skills, and encourage them to identify internal benchmarks of achievement. Providing timely feedback (AF2) also ensures that the learner has the opportunity to revise their approaches, and achieve a better outcome. This places the feedback on improving and enhancing (an approach goal) rather than trying to reflect and avoid similar errors the next time (an avoidance goal).

Maintaining a positive environment in assessment, where assessment is seen as a useful, reaffirming, and motivating activity for the learner is beneficial to effective learning.

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