



Article

How Students Define Success Differently for Classes They Like or Dislike

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Abstract: Most of the research examining student motivation, particularly achievement goals, has relied on experimental or survey methods that narrow the number and type of goals students can report. A few researchers have asked students open-ended questions, either using surveys or interviews, about what they want to accomplish and their reasons for studying or trying to achieve. These studies have generally found a larger number of goals across a broader set of categories (e.g., social-comparison, internal standard, social, work-avoidance, utilitarian) than is typically examined in research on achievement goals. In this study, we asked a sample of 152 undergraduate students at one university in California (USA) to describe how they defined success in two different classes: One they liked and one they disliked. Our objectives were to examine how students described their definitions for success, whether those definitions differed for liked and disliked classes, and to learn about students' perceptions regarding the sources of their definitions of success. The results indicated that students' definitions of success were more varied in classes they liked than in those they disliked. In addition, their definitions focused more on developing competence and positive relationships with the teacher in classes they liked, but they focused on getting a good grade, completing the class, and avoiding work in classes they disliked. The results also indicated that students perceived different sources of the same definitions of success for liked and disliked classes, with a greater emphasis on bad teaching and difficult course material in the disliked class. The implications for conceptualizing the methodology for studying achievement goals are discussed.



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1. Introduction

In the early 1980's, a group of scholars developed a social-cognitive conceptualization of achievement motivation that came to be known as Achievement Goal Theory (AGT). These scholars—Carole Ames, Carol Dweck, Martin Maehr, and John Nicholls—argued that the way students (or anyone) define success in a given achievement context affects a range of cognitive and affective reactions to success and failure and influences the effort they put into the task [1]. These scholars, and many who followed, argued that different definitions of success shape the way students think about the purposes of achievement, and these purposes are called achievement goals.

Although a number of different goals have been proposed [2,3], the vast majority of the research in AGT has focused on two different definitions of success: Mastery and Performance goals. When pursuing mastery goals, students define success as learning, understanding, and improving their skills. In contrast, when pursuing performance goals, students define success in social-comparative terms. The purpose of achievement from a performance goal perspective is to perform better than others, and success is defined as outperforming others or not performing worse than others; see [4,5] for reviews. These two dimensions of achievement goals have been sub-divided into approach and avoidance components [6]. Performance-approach goals involve defining success as outperforming others, whereas performance-avoidance goals focus on not performing worse than others.

Mastery-approach goals represent a desire to grow, improve, and develop skills, whereas mastery-avoidance goals define success as not losing abilities or knowledge.

An abundance of research over the last four decades has demonstrated that the goals students pursue in achievement settings influence a broad range of outcomes, including achievement, affective reactions to success and failure, feelings of self-efficacy, the cognitive strategies used while engaged in the task, valuing of the work, and perceptions of the motivational climate in the classroom; see [1,4,7] for reviews. Most of this research has found that the pursuit of mastery goals is associated with beneficial outcomes, including deeper cognitive strategy use, more positive feelings about academic work, higher levels of self-efficacy, and less negative reactions to failure. Mastery goals are associated with a growth mindset [8], and less likely to produce maladaptive behaviors like self-handicapping [9]. In contrast, performance goals have been found to be associated with more shallow cognitive engagement, more shame upon failure, a greater tendency to cheat, and more self-handicapping. This is especially true for performance-avoidance goals. The accumulated research indicates that different goals lead students to different emotional and behavioral outcomes.

The study of achievement goals has relied primarily on two methodologies: surveys and experiments. Several researchers have developed survey measures of achievement goals, and the two that have been most commonly used over the last 20 years are the Achievement Goals Questionnaire [10] and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey [11]. Both of these surveys include a number of items designed to assess mastery and performance goals, and these items are grouped together to form scales for three or four goal types (mastery-approach, performance-approach, performance-avoidance, and sometimes mastery-avoidance, which is the type of achievement goal that has been examined the least.) In experimental designs, achievement goals are manipulated by instructions that tell participants their objective while completing the task is to improve their skills (mastery-approach goal), get a higher score than other participants (performance-approach goal), or not perform worse than others (performance-avoidance goal). There is extensive research using both methodologies and a large body of literature exists that has documented both the antecedents and the consequences of different kinds of achievement goal pursuit; see [4,5,7] for reviews.

1.1. Different Methods, Different Goals

As described above, most of the research using survey or experimental methodologies has focused on two broad goal types: Mastery and performance goals. Since its inception, however, research on achievement goals has periodically included additional goals. Nicholls and his colleagues, for example, often included work-avoidance goals in their measures of achievement goals [12]. Several researchers have measured social goals, such as the desire to succeed academically for the sake of pleasing others or the goal of gaining social status [3,13]. Grant and Dweck [2] posited and measured four kinds of achievement goals: Two that mirror mastery and performance goals, an outcome goal (i.e., the goal of obtaining positive outcomes) and ability goals, which involve validating one's competence.

Periodically, researchers have used qualitative methods to assess students' goals, and these efforts have consistently produced results that are at odds with the more traditional research that uses survey or experimental methodologies. In one early example of a qualitative approach, Lemos [14] interviewed middle-school students about their purposes for achievement striving, both at a general level and at a situation-specific level. She found that when students were not presented with pre-defined goals on surveys or via experimental manipulation, students' goal statements were coded into seven different categories: enjoyment, learning, complying with teacher or task demands, working to complete tasks, gaining positive evaluations of their work, relationship goals aimed at fostering positive relationships with teachers and/or peers, and discipline goals that involved following rules and avoiding punishment. One of the most notable findings from

this research was that students did not spontaneously generate normative-comparison goals. In other words, they did not mention performance goals.

Urdu and his colleagues conducted two qualitative studies to examine students' achievement goals. In the first, they videotaped classroom segments that they believed reflected an emphasis on mastery or performance goals. Then, they watched these segments with students and asked the students to think aloud about what goal messages they perceived [15]. Whereas many students were able to identify mastery-oriented practices in the classroom (e.g., a teacher emphasizing that each student was capable of learning and understanding the material), very few students identified any practices as promoting competition or social comparison. In a later study, Urdu and Mestas [16] collected survey data from high school students. They selected a sub-sample of students whom, on the surveys, indicated strong endorsement of performance-avoidance goals. In interviews with this sub-sample, they found that many students had misinterpreted the survey items. In addition, they provided a variety of reasons for endorsing performance goals, including competition, wanting to please parents, and proving something to themselves.

In another qualitative study involving individual interviews and observations of students in specific learning situations, Dowson and McInerney [17] found that students spontaneously generated eight different goals. They classified three of these goals as academic in nature (mastery goals, performance goals, and work-avoidance goals) and five as social-academic goals (e.g., wanting to achieve for the sake of gaining or maintaining social status or to fulfill role obligations). In addition, Dowson and McInerney found that each of the different goals students pursued had behavioral, cognitive, and affective components, and that they combined in dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, some students noted that their desire to perform well in school conflicted with one or more social goals, as friends derided them for trying too hard to achieve.

Lee and Bong [18] also conducted a qualitative study of achievement goals, asking a sample of middle school students about their reasons for studying. As others who used qualitative methods have found, students mentioned a variety of goals that included both competence concerns and social concerns. They found that the kinds of goals students mentioned most often depended on contextual and individual variables. For example, when students were discussing future outcomes, such as gaining entry to a prestigious college or earning a good living, students tended to focus on performance goals. In contrast, when considering current studying behavior, they were more likely to focus on mastery goals such as learning and understanding the material. In addition, Lee and Bong found that the goal category mentioned most frequently by students was the social-status goal identified by Dowson and McInerney [17], followed by social-comparison goals captured in various survey measures of performance goals.

1.2. Summary

Existing research that has employed qualitative methods to assess students' goals, most frequently open-ended questions in interviews or surveys, has generated a number of results that are at least partially at odds with closed-ended survey measures of students' goals. Most notably, students tend to spontaneously generate a large number of goals, and many of them are social in nature. Some have argued that social goals do not fit the true definition of achievement goals because social goals are either not focused specifically on achievement (e.g., wanting to make friends or be popular) or because the social element is a reason for the goal, but not the goal itself [1]. A student who wants to perform well in school in order to make their parents proud has a specific achievement goal (i.e., doing better than others or gaining mastery of the material) for the purpose of gaining parental approval. Others have argued that social-academic goals (i.e., trying to achieve academically for the purpose of obtaining a desired social outcome) are a separate class of achievement goal, e.g., [3,17].

Most of this qualitative research on students' goals has asked students to discuss their reasons for studying or trying to achieve in school. The reasons that students generate have

then been interpreted as proxies for their achievement goals. Not surprisingly, the reasons that students generated included a combination of what might be deemed traditional achievement goals (e.g., wanting to perform better than others) and the reasons for these goals (e.g., to impress parents or build social bonds with peers). This combination of goals and reasons for the goals has been studied for some time, e.g., [16], and recently been defined as a goal complex [19]. In the present study, we asked students to think about how they defined success in the classroom and used their definitions of success as an indicator of their goals in those classrooms. The early definitions of achievement goals tended to focus on different definitions of success that students may hold [20,21], so we decided to go back to that early definition of goals in this study. We then asked about the reasons for those definitions of success separately in an attempt to separate the goal from the reason.

Much of the research on achievement goal strivings, both using closed-ended survey questions or open-ended survey or interview questions, has asked about goals at a general level. For example, students have been asked why they study, why they want to achieve in school, or about their goals for school in general (e.g., “One of my goals in school is to perform better than other students”). Another common approach to the measurement of achievement goals has been to ask students about a specific domain, such as mathematics. A limited number of studies, however, have asked students about their goals in more than one domain to see if their goals differed. For example, Hornstra, van der Veen, and Peetsma [22] used closed-ended survey items to assess elementary students’ achievement goals in mathematics and language classes. They found some variability across these domains, but also quite high correlations of the same goals in the two domains. Similarly, Lemos [14], using a case-study approach with a small sample of 17 sixth-grade students, found little evidence of differences in their goal pursuits across different academic subjects. In the present study, we wanted to explore potential differences in achievement goals by comparing definitions of success in two classes with different affective experiences for students: Classes they liked compared with classes they disliked.

The research was guided by three main research questions. First, we wanted to know how students defined success in class, using their own words. We were particularly interested in how their definitions of success could be classified into different achievement goal categories and along different dimensions of motivation principles (More detail about these coding categories is presented in the Section 2.3 below). A second research question was whether students might define success differently for classes they liked compared to classes they disliked. Researchers examining achievement goals often ask students to respond in general terms, such as why they try hard or study in school. We wanted to see if their goal-related definitions of success differed depending on the classroom contexts in which they were defining success. We were especially interested in whether the number of success definitions, complexity of those definitions, and content of the definitions of success differed for liked and disliked classes. Our third research question was about what students perceived were the sources of their definitions of success and whether that differed for classes they liked or disliked.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Data were collected from 152 (94 female, 55 male, one gender-fluid, one non-binary, and one who did not indicate their gender) undergraduate students selected from an Introductory Psychology subject pool. This study was made available to all students in the subject pool and any students who chose to participate were included in the study. Students in the subject pool received partial course credit for participating in research studies. Ninety-two percent of the participants were in their first or second year at a four-year comprehensive university. The sample was ethnically diverse: 46% self-identified as white, 25% identified as east Asian, 11% Latinx, 13% multiple ethnicities, and the remaining five percent included small numbers of African American, South-Asian Indian, and Middle-Eastern students.

2.2. Materials and Procedure

Data were collected between October 2021 and June 2022. A survey was administered online using the Qualtrics platform. It contained five open-ended questions for students to answer about a class from high school or college that they enjoyed and five parallel questions about a class they disliked. The five questions were as follows:

1. Please think about a class that you really enjoyed, either in high school or in college. What class did you think of?
2. How did you define success in this class?
3. Why was this your definition of success in this class? In other words, what caused you to define success in this class this way?
4. Please describe the reason or reasons you had for defining success in this way. For example, some students may define success in a class as getting an A because they wanted good grades to get into a good college. Other students may also define success as getting an A, but for other reasons (e.g., because parents paid them for each A they got, because they wanted to prove that they could succeed, because the A made them feel proud of themselves, etc.). So, please use this space to explain the purpose you had for defining success as you did.
5. Please write anything else you want to tell us about how you defined success in this class and why. For example, if there was something about the classroom, the teacher, or yourself that led to this definition of success, please explain that here.

After answering these open-ended questions for a class that they liked, students completed the same questions for a class they disliked. Once the open-ended questions were completed, participants were presented with a set of demographic questions about their gender, age, cultural identity, year in college, and college major.

2.3. Coding of Survey Data

An iterative process was used to code the open-ended survey responses. First, two research assistants independently created a taxonomy of all of the definitions that participants gave for success in each of the two classes they identified (i.e., liked and disliked). The lists generated by each research assistant were very similar (over 90% agreement), with some confusion about how to classify some of the complex answers that participants gave that included multiple definitions of success (e.g., “To get a good grade and to learn something new”). In consultation with the first author, answers were discussed until mutually agreed-upon classifications for all statements were reached. All definitions offered were included in the taxonomy. Because many students included multiple definitions of success in their responses, the number of definitions of success is higher than the number of participants in the sample.

After creating a taxonomy, the definitions were grouped into categories twice, using different approaches to the study of motivation to create these categories. First, the definitions of success were coded using the 2×2 achievement goal categories that have been described by different achievement goal researchers, e.g., [10,11]. Each definition of success that could cleanly be categorized as representing one of the four achievement goals (i.e., mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, performance-avoidance) was coded as such. The first and second authors each coded the same set of approximately 10% of responses to reach agreement about the goal categories. Then, the second author coded the remaining responses into either one of the four goal categories or a separate category that was not one of the four achievement goals. Definitions of success that did not fit cleanly into any of the four achievement goal categories were noted in separate categories.

Next, we used a framework of motivation principles developed by Urdan and Turner [23] to code the definitions of success. In their chapter, Urdan and Turner looked across a number of prominent theories of motivation, identified their core components, and developed a list of motivation principles to capture these core components. These motivation principles included feelings of competence, valuing of the class or material (this principle includes

interest, enjoyment, value, perceived relevance of the material), feelings of agency, and feelings of social belonging. These motivation principles were developed using concepts from self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy research, interest research, and social-belonging research. Notably, other approaches to motivation, particularly those that focus on extrinsic motives or competition, were not included in these principles. Once again, both authors coded about 10% of the responses together to establish agreement about the categories, and once agreement was established, the second author coded the statements into each of these categories. As was the case when coding according to achievement goal categories, not all statements fit neatly into one of the four motivation principles categories. Those that did not were noted in separate categories.

It is worth mentioning that we did not code all grade statements as achievement goals. Over the five decades of research on achievement goals, the desire to get good grades has sometimes been treated as an indicator of performance approach goals. But students have many reasons for wanting to get good grades. Sometimes, they view good grades as indicators that they have really learned and understood the material. Other times, they think of grades as a currency they can use to get some other desired outcome, like admission to a graduate program or a chance at a better job. Because grades represent different goals, we conducted a separate analysis of the grade statements and used information from the other survey questions (i.e., why they defined success that way and the reasons for defining success that way) to help us understand and code what grades meant for each student.

3. Results

The definitions of success that students mentioned in the survey were coded three ways. First, a taxonomy of all definitions of success was created separately for liked and disliked classes. This taxonomy of success definitions is presented in Table 1. For classes that participants liked, 33 different definitions of success were mentioned. These ranged from understanding the material to forming connections with teachers or other students to not feeling stress. The most frequently mentioned definition of success in classes that students liked was getting a good grade (26 mentions), but only 3 participants said that was their only definition of success in classes they liked. In other words, 23 of the 26 students who said getting a good grade was how they defined success in classes they liked also provided other definitions of success, such as understanding the material or completing all of the assignments. Gaining knowledge or understanding the material was the second most-frequently mentioned definition of success.

For disliked classes, students mentioned far fewer kinds of definitions of success compared to the list they generated for classes they liked: eight. Most of these definitions centered on getting a good grade in the class, passing the class and/or the exams, and simply getting through the class, sometimes with the stated goal of doing as little as possible. There were a fair number of students who also gave non-utilitarian or extrinsic definitions of success. These included learning and gaining competence in the class (20 participants), enjoying the class (1 student), and trying to do their best (3 students), among other definitions. In addition to the smaller number of success definitions for disliked compared to liked classes, the content of the definitions was quite different as well. Whereas the success definitions were more varied and generally focused more on internal standards like gaining knowledge, participating in class, enjoying the experience, and mastering skills in the like class, for the disliked class, the focus was narrower and more centered around grades and completion.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Definitions of Success for Liked and Disliked Classes.

Liked Classes	Disliked Classes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting a good grade • Knowledge/Learning/understanding • Picked up content fast • Didn't have to study hard • Getting things correct • Completed every assignment • How well they could play the song • Getting 4 or higher on AP exam • How much they understood via feedback from professor • Doing their best • Enjoying the class • Allow students to learn • Answering questions before running out of time • Speaking whenever they could • Getting good experience • Connecting material to life • Amount of improvement • Mentorship • Pass the class • Applying what they learned • Timely, skillful completion • Shaped perception • Creating cohesive sentences without translator • Connection with classmates • Relationship with teacher • Retaining knowledge • Keeping up with classwork • Producing quality work • Not feeling stressed • Learning new information • Paying attention • Understanding • Participating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good Grades/Test Score (B or higher) Do as little as possible/getting through it Pass the Class/Exams Complete the Assignments Competence/Understanding Enjoyment Pleasing the Teacher Trying their best/Working hard

3.1. Achievement Goal Classifications

After creating a complete taxonomy of the success definitions that participants provided, these definitions were categorized into the four achievement goal categories of mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance. For the classes that students liked, none of the definitions of success they generated were coded as representing either mastery or performance avoidance goals. In contrast, 107 of the success definitions were coded as representing a mastery-approach goal, and 47 of those statements were the only definition of success the participant provided. In other words, 47 of the participants defined success in the class they liked solely in mastery-approach terms (e.g., success was defined as learning, gaining skills, mastering a concept, improving). An additional 31 success definitions in liked classes were categorized as representing performance-approach goals (i.e., performing better than others, demonstrating ability), with 9 participants defining success only in performance-approach goal terms.

For the classes that students disliked, there were again no statements that were coded as either mastery-avoidance or performance-avoidance. Students did define success in mastery-approach terms 36 times (6 times as the only definition of success), and in a performance-approach goal way 6 times. Overall, students were much more likely to define success in terms of getting a good grade (115 statements), just getting through the class, or completing the assignments and avoiding work (36 statements) for disliked classes than

for liked classes. Because these categories do not clearly represent any of the achievement goals, there were far fewer success definitions that fit into achievement goal categories for disliked than for like classes.

3.2. Motivation Principle Classifications

The definitions of success for liked classes were also coded into the principles of motivation categories. Using this coding scheme, 107 statements were coded as fitting into the Competence category. Fifty success definitions fit into the Value/Interest/Enjoyment category. Only two students mentioned that their definition of success included a sense of Agency, and six statements were coded in the Belongingness category. For classes that students disliked, there were 36 statements that were coded as reflecting the Competence principle, 5 in the Interest/Enjoyment/Value category, and 3 in the Belonging category. None of the success definitions were coded as being explicitly about having a sense of Agency. Again, it is important to note that defining success as getting a good grade was not included in these categories because students have many reasons for wanting to get good grades. Although it is likely that at least some of these students viewed getting a good grade as a reflection of their competence, others likely viewed grades as the currency of the school system, with good grades leading to graduation, graduate school acceptance, and better job opportunities. It is not clear whether students with this interpretation of grades are thinking about them as indicators, for themselves, of their own increasing competence.

In Figures 1 and 2, pie charts indicating the number of success definitions that were coded into each category are presented, along with the percentage of statements that fit into each category. In Figure 1, the success definitions for the liked class are presented. This graph clearly illustrates that most of the success statements were about learning, improving, mastering the new information (mastery-approach goals/competence concerns), and that a good experience with the teacher was also a common definition of success. Work avoidance and belonging were the two smallest slivers of the pie (and are unlabeled). Each was mentioned twice. In Figure 2, the definitions of success in the disliked classes were dominated by the grade definition, followed by definitions involving gaining competence. The smallest sliver, with two mentions, was for definitions involving a good experience with the teacher. Note that there are two small slices of the pies in Figures 1 and 2 without labels. These represent categories that were only mentioned once or twice by participants and therefore not considered important categories.

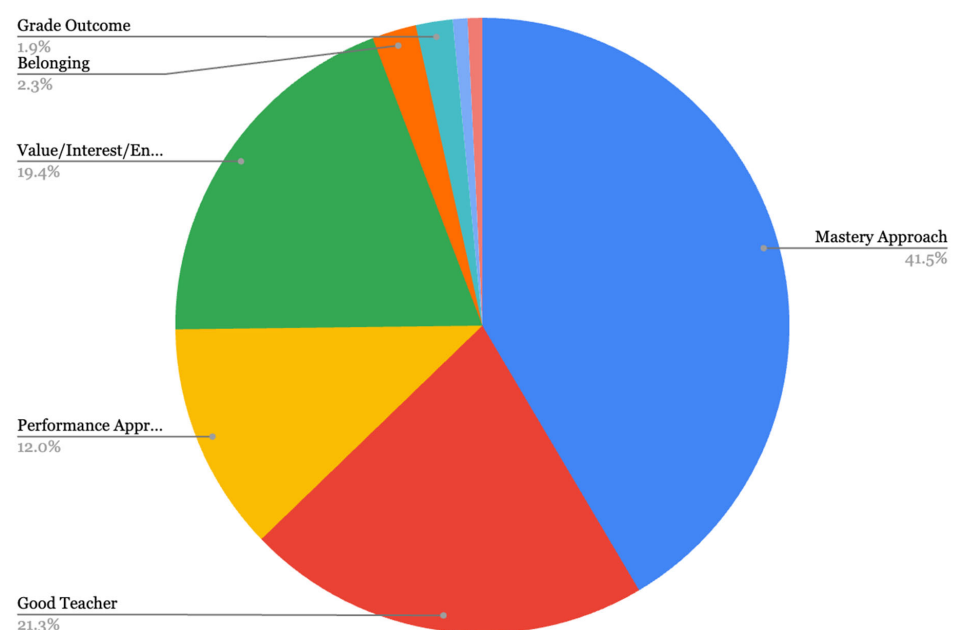


Figure 1. Categories of Success Definitions for Liked Classes.

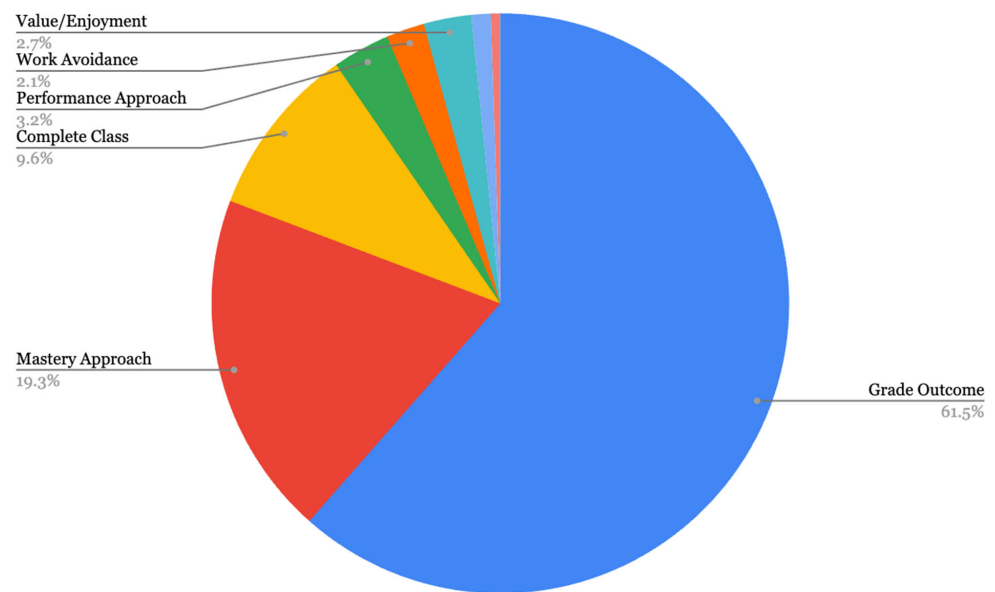


Figure 2. Categories of Success Definitions for Disliked Classes.

3.3. Sources of Success Definitions

After presenting their definitions of success, participants were asked about the origins and influences on those definitions. Some students provided a single source (e.g., “My family emphasized getting good grades.”), and others provided multiple sources. Some of the sources of success definitions were quite complex and multi-faceted. For example, one student defined success in a class they liked as getting a good grade. For the source of this definition, the student said the following:

I defined success in this class because I, and most other students, are very grade-oriented and do not pay much attention to the learning that goes on. I did it mainly for college. I also did it for myself as well, when I get good grades it makes me feel happy because I know that I worked hard in order to get that grade.

As this example illustrates, students’ beliefs about how they define success and why they developed these definitions are multidimensional. In addition, this example (and many others) demonstrate that the goal of getting good grades is often multidimensional, encompassing both external (as currency for college admission) and internal (feelings of pride) components.

The sources that students mentioned for their success definitions differed depending on the nature of the definition of success as well as whether they liked the class or not. To conduct an analysis of the sources of success definitions, we explored those given for the same definition of success but for different classes. The only definition of success that was mentioned somewhat frequently both for liked and disliked classes was the definition we categorized as gaining competence, which we deemed as mastery-approach goals in our coding process using achievement goals. In Figures 3 and 4, we present a summary of the sources of mastery-approach definitions of success that students gave for liked and disliked classes. For liked classes, the most frequently mentioned source of the mastery goal definition was an internal source, such as wanting to feel proud or prove to themselves that they could do it (45% of the source statements for the mastery goal definitions). External factors, such as wanting to get into a good college or have a successful career, were the second most frequently mentioned source (33%). Less frequently mentioned sources of the mastery goal definition of success included making family members proud (10%), wanting to learn (9%), wanting to demonstrate one’s intelligence (1.6%), and one student who said it was just a norm emphasized in her culture.

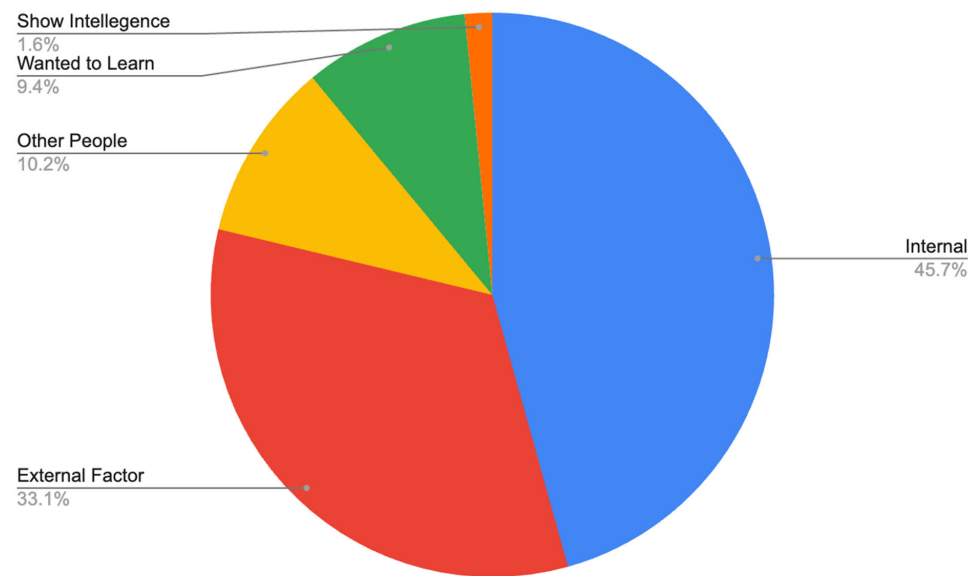


Figure 3. Sources of Mastery Goal Definition of Success for Liked Class.

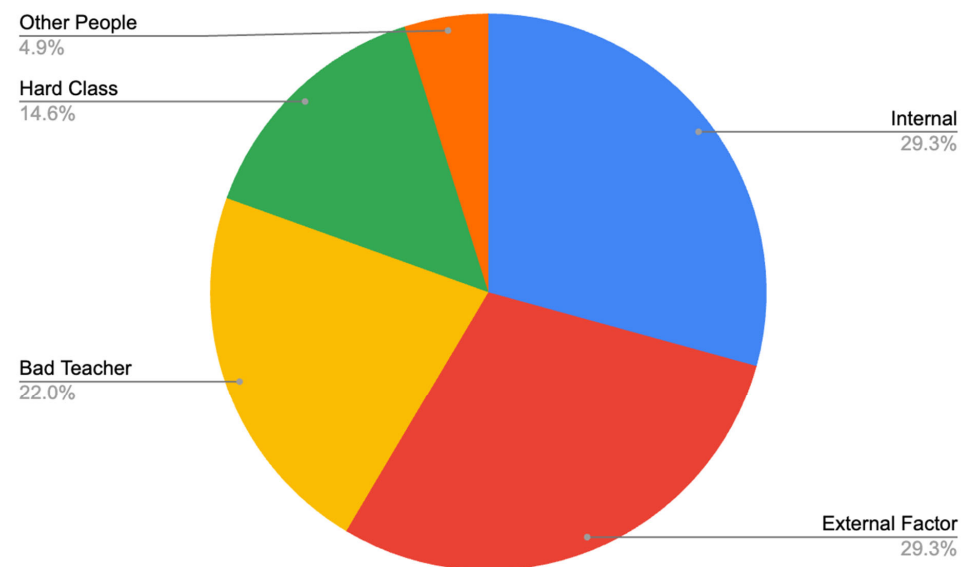


Figure 4. Sources of Mastery Goal Definition of Success for Disliked Class.

For disliked classes, internal (29%) and external (29%) sources of mastery goal definitions of success were mentioned with equal frequency. In addition, about 5% of students said that wanting to please parents or make them proud was the source of their definition of success. Unexpectedly, for classes that students disliked, the difficulty of the class (15%) and believing that the teacher was bad (22%) were also mentioned as sources of their mastery goal definitions of success. For these students, there was an air of defiance in some of their responses, especially those who mentioned the bad teacher as a source for their definition of success. For example, this student pursued a mastery goal because the teacher made it difficult to focus on getting a good grade.

I knew I couldn't see a reflection of success in my grades as she intentionally tried to lower ours. So, my definition of success in this class was in my mastery and eventual application of the subject I learned in things like the AP tests.

In several of these instances, the source of the mastery goal seems to be at odds with the mastery goal itself.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine a sample of college-students' definitions for success in two classroom settings: a class from high school or college that they liked and one that they disliked. Some of the early conceptualizations of achievement goals framed goals as being guided by different definitions of success in achievement settings [20]. In a precursor to the development of achievement goal theory, Maehr [24] argued that achievement motivation is guided by how one defines success, and this early conceptualization of different definitions of success became part of the definition of achievement goals [21,25]. These early definitions of achievement goals focused primarily on distinguishing between defining success as performing better than others and appearing smart (ego-involved performance goals) or defining success using an internal standard of personal growth, achievement, and learning (mastery goals).

Most of the research on achievement goals has continued to focus on these two different definitions of success. Experiments that manipulate participants to adopt either performance or mastery goals have been conducted, e.g., [26], and surveys have been developed to assess these two types of goals, e.g., [10,11]. But there have long been questions about whether there are only these two kinds of definitions of success, or if these are an artifact of how researchers have conceptualized and assessed achievement goals [3,27]. Several studies that have asked students about their goals using open-ended questions, either with surveys or interviews, have revealed that students often talk about a variety of goals when given an opportunity to do so [14,17,18]. In addition, these studies reveal that performance goals are not mentioned as often as research examining only mastery and performance goals may suggest.

In the present study, we wanted to build on the qualitative work examining goals in three ways. First, we wanted to compare students' definitions of success in classes they liked and classes they disliked. Much of the research examining achievement goals has assessed them at a general level, asking students to think about their goals in school or their reasons for studying. This is also true for qualitative studies of goals, where students have been asked about their general reasons for studying [18] or sometimes within a specific academic subject [16]. Research that has compared students' achievement goals across different academic domains, however, has revealed that there are both similarities and differences in goal profiles across academic subjects [28,29]. In the present study, we found that students defined success quite differently for classes they liked and those they disliked. Specifically, students were much more likely to define success in mastery-goal terms and social-relationship terms for classes they liked and in utilitarian terms of getting a good grade and completing the class for classes they disliked.

These results fit with our common experience and have implications for how achievement goals are studied. Although there may be enduring individual differences in motivational profiles that persist across situations and over time (e.g., some people may be more competitive, others more focused on their own growth and improvement), it is important to note that characteristics of the learning environment may combine with students' affective experience of it to shape how they define success and, by extension, their achievement goals. In survey research with closed-ended questions, researchers have found that students differ in their perceptions of the achievement goals emphasized in their classrooms but have had difficulty establishing that these perceived classroom goal structures directly affect their own achievement goals [30]. Experimental manipulations of goals have had better luck demonstrating that situational demands can affect the goals students adopt, but these manipulations tend to lack ecological validity. The present study demonstrates that when asking students to think about classes in which their qualitative experience was fundamentally different, the way they define success tends to switch from a focus on learning (in classes they liked) to a focus on survival and the extrinsic reward of grades. These findings suggest that the way students think about success may depend more on their affective experience in the classroom than on the subject matter. Additional research examining how

social, cognitive, and affective features of the classroom experience combine to influence students' achievement goals is needed.

A second objective of this study was to see how well students' definitions of success fit into two different categorical schemes: achievement goals and principles of motivation. Definitions having to do with developing skills and gaining knowledge were the most common for liked classes and overlapped almost entirely between the mastery goals category and the competence principle of motivation. Interestingly, avoidance goals were almost never mentioned for either class, a result that others who have used open-ended questions to examine goals have also reported [14]. In fact, Urdan and Mestas [16] found that even when students reported high levels of performance-avoidance goals on closed-ended survey questions, they tended to speak in approach terms when asked about those goals in interviews.

The participants in our study also rarely mentioned agency as part of their definitions of success. We suspect that this may be more of an artifact of language rather than a lack of importance of the construct. Agency may not be top of mind when students think about what makes them feel successful, but it may be a part of other definitions. For example, when students said they wanted to simply complete a class they disliked because the teacher was unpleasant or the material was either boring or too difficult, it is quite possible that their experience in the class felt coerced rather than volitional. Similarly, some students who defined success as getting a good grade or learning new information may have experienced the course as agentic and would have perhaps chosen a different definition if they had felt coerced. Asking about definitions of success may simply lend itself more to some principles of motivation, such as competence and interest, than others, like agency and belonging. Similarly, when thinking about success, students may naturally be less inclined to think about definitions that involve avoidance. Our results may serve as a reminder that the results obtained may depend a fair amount on what questions are asked of participants, as well as the format used to ask them. This is true whether using open-ended questions as we did in this study or closed-ended survey items.

Our third objective in this research was to understand the source of students' definitions of success. Although there has been a surge of interest recently in examining the reasons that underlie the goals students adopt, e.g., [31,32], most of the extant research on achievement goals has focused on the consequences of goal adoption and not the antecedents. In the present study, we found that students' definitions of success are influenced by a variety of sources, and that these sources may differ depending on both the definition of success and whether they liked or disliked a class. Students who defined success as getting a good grade mentioned a variety of sources for that definition, including internal pressure to succeed, external pressure from family and society, and the long socialization process of education that taught some students grades are all that matters. Even though students mentioned a variety of sources for their definition of success in both liked and disliked classes, the emphasis tended to differ between these classes. For example, even when defining success in terms of good grades, students were more likely to say that the grade indicated that they had learned the material well and this was satisfying in classes they liked, but that good grades were their only way of defining meaning in classes they disliked because they were boring or very difficult. As other research has demonstrated, students who endorse the same goals (or, in this case, the same definitions of success) may differ in how they think about and define those goals, and these differences may depend on contextual factors including their affective reactions to their classes [16]. Our analysis of the sources of mastery goal definitions of success revealed that these sources were sometimes quite different for liked and disliked classes. Although the desire to feel proud and to please others was similar in both types of classes, students were somewhat more likely to cite internal sources of their definitions for liked classes than for disliked classes. In addition, students only mentioned bad teachers and difficulty of the class as sources of their mastery goals when talking about disliked classes. These results suggest that both

the definitions of success and the sources of these definitions may be influenced by how students feel about the course overall.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in the present study. Some of them are common to much of the research in this area of achievement goal research, including reliance on a single source for the data and a convenience sample that may not accurately represent the broader population. The data for this study came from undergraduate students at one university. Another limitation is that we did not vary the order of the classes about which students offered definitions of success. Because we asked all students to think about a class they liked first, it is possible that students wrote less about their disliked classes due to fatigue. Because the average time to complete the surveys was about 10 min, we do not think survey fatigue played a large role. However, future research should balance the response order.

In addition, there are two specific limitations that readers should keep in mind as they interpret the results of this study and consider its broader implications. First, students' definitions of success are not a perfect proxy for achievement goals. Although researchers have often argued that achievement goals represent different ways of defining success in achievement contexts, much of the work on achievement goals has focused on how to clearly and precisely define these goals [1]. These definitions of achievement goals have emphasized that goals are cognitive representations of desired outcomes of achievement strivings, and definitions of success may be more general than this, encompassing emotional responses to the content, social interactions, and performance in different classes. These differences between the definitions of success and the definitions of achievement goals may limit the applicability of the findings in the present study to our understanding of the nature and function of achievement goals.

Another limitation of the present research is its reliance on students' memories of their experiences in classes that they may have had several years ago. Retrospective studies are limited by the quality of memory itself, and it is quite possible that participants' memories of their prior classes are different than their actual experience while taking those classes. Of course, this same limitation applies to any data collection method that asks students to reflect on their goals, beliefs, and feelings during any situation that they are not currently experiencing, and we believe that asking students to think about specific classes they liked or disliked may provide more specific information than asking students to report their goals for school or learning more generally. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge this limitation in the present research as recollections of past experience may not be an accurate reflection of students' cognitions and emotions in those achievement settings at the time that they experienced them.

5. Conclusions

The results of the present research have both methodological and theoretical implications for research on achievement goals. Regarding methodology, our results indicate that asking open-ended questions and about different classroom experiences yields different and important information about goals that may be difficult to capture with methods that limit that goals to those few that are pre-determined by the researcher. Theoretically, our results suggest that students' definitions of success and, by extension, their goals, may be linked to their affective experience in class. Early conceptualizations of achievement goals included the affective dimension, and it may be worthwhile to return to thinking about goals as part of a system that includes both cognitive and affective dimensions.

This study builds upon prior research that has used open-ended survey and interview questions to examine students' goals, purposes, and definitions of success for achievement-oriented behavior. Such research supplements and extends survey and experimental methods of studying achievement goals by providing evidence of the complexity and multidimensionality of these goals. In addition, this research raises questions about the

number of goals students pursue, the types of goals they pursue, and the frequency with which they adopt the most frequently studied achievement goals. In the present study, we also added a contextual factor: Whether they liked or disliked the class. We believe this study fits well with recent calls to use multiple methods and to consider contextual factors in examinations of student motivation in general and in the study of achievement goals in particular [5].

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