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RUNNING HEAD: Motives underlying Achievement Goals

Moving the Achievement Goal Approach One Step Forward:
Towards a Systematic Examination of the Reasons Underlying Achievement Goals

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Abstract

The literature on achievement goals has exponentially increased over the past two decades, which raises the question how the field can be advanced even further. Herein, we make the case that restricting the definition of achievement goals to aims paves the way for a systematic consideration of the reasons underlying individuals’ pursuit of achievement goals, an issue that researchers have only begun to address. Most of this work is rooted in Self-Determination Theory, which differentiates between an autonomous or a relatively more controlled regulation of achievement goals. This paper reviews this growing body of work on the “why” of achievement goals. To further stimulate work in this area, we formulated five propositions, arguing that consideration of the “why” (i.e., reasons) in addition to the “what” (i.e., aims) of achievement goals (a) provides an account for the regulatory basis of achievement goals, (b) opens the door for other motivation theories to be linked to the achievement goal literature, (c) matters in terms of predicting outcomes, (d) allows for a richer account of contextual forces influencing motivation, and (e) sets the stage for an enriched hierarchical model of achievement motivation. In closing we provide ideas for a number of future research directions.

Key terms: Achievement goals, Reasons, Hierarchical Model of Achievement Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, Autonomous and Controlled Regulation
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The literature on achievement goals has burgeoned over the past 30 years. Scholars in diverse domains, including education, sport, and work, have documented the correlates and effects of different types of achievement goals relying on cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental methodologies (Elliot, 2005; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Murayama, Elliot, & Friedman, 2011). Herein, we review recent empirical work that has just begun to systematically consider people’s underlying motives or reasons for adopting and pursuing achievement goals. Through this contribution, we want to make the case that the consideration of these underlying motives or reasons enables achievement goal researchers to take the achievement goal approach one step further. After reviewing three historical trends that characterize the more recent achievement goal literature, we formulate five propositions that aim to elucidate the added value of considering the motives or reasons underlying achievement goal striving and we sketch a number of future research directions in the interest of stimulating empirical work in this area.

Historical Trends

Towards Extension: Increasing the Number of Achievement Goals

One trend that can be clearly noted in the achievement goal literature involves the gradual extension of the number of studied achievement goals across the years, increasing from two (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984) to three (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) to four (Elliot, 1999) and more recently to six (Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011). Specifically, whereas the dichotomous achievement goal perspective was limited to the examination of mastery and performance goals (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984), the trichotomous perspective involved bifurcating the non-differentiated performance goal.
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construct into performance-avoidance and performance-approach goals which are, respectively, oriented towards the avoidance of normative incompetence and the approach of normative competence (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Skaalvik, 1997). This valence dimension was then systematically applied across both performance and mastery goals, such that a 2x2 framework was developed (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2000). Specifically, the valence dimension concerns whether competence is construed in a positive way (i.e., as approaching competence) or in a negative way (i.e., as avoiding incompetence). This dimension is crossed with the way competence, and the resulting success, is defined, that is, on the basis of normative (i.e., interpersonal) versus task-based and intrapersonal standards. Within the 2x2 approach, the mastery goal concept has been operationalized in two different ways, as individuals were said to be mastery oriented when they strive to master the requirements of the task (i.e., task-based criterion; e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001) or when they try to surpass a personal standard (i.e., intrapersonal criterion; e.g., Van Yperen, 2006; see also Martin, 2006). The next logical step involved breaking down this non-differentiated mastery goal construct, such that a formal distinction was made between task-based and intrapersonal standards, which were both differentiated from normative standards (Elliot et al., 2011).

Although work on the 3x2 perspective is still in its infancy, this gradual extension of the number of achievement goals has proven fruitful, as achievement goals have largely yielded the theoretically predicted relations with both antecedents and outcomes. Overall, the steady increase in the number of achievement goals does not involve a loss of parsimony, as the added achievement goals are theoretically grounded and allow for a fuller explanation (i.e., more variance) of “old” outcomes, while simultaneously accounting for a broader set of phenomena. To illustrate, intrapersonal goals have been found to yield a unique association with learners’ energy in class (new outcome), while all three approach goals were predicted
by approach temperament (Elliot et al., 2011; see Murayama et al., 2011 and Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011 for recent narrative overviews).

**Towards Integration: The Hierarchical Model of Achievement Motivation**

A second important evolution within the achievement goal literature represents the integration of the more recent work on achievement goals with the classic work on *achievement-related motive dispositions* (Atkinson, 1957). In the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997) it is argued that achievement-related motive dispositions represent broad competence-based constructs that influence the adoption of achievement goals in specific learning situations. Two motivational dispositions in particular have received much research attention and are critical to the current review, that is, the need for achievement and fear of failure. As introduced by Atkinson (1957), need for achievement represents individuals’ dispositional inclination to seek positive outcomes (i.e., success) in achievement tasks, whereas fear of failure represents individuals’ dispositional tendency to avoid negative outcomes (i.e., failure) in such tasks. Within the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999), these acquired motive dispositions reflect general competence- and affect-based motivational constructs that energize individuals in achievement situations and orient them towards success or away from failure. Achievement goals thus represent the *channels* through which the motive to succeed and the motive to avoid failure manifest themselves in more specific achievement contexts or situations.

The inclusion of these antecedent motives is of considerable theoretical importance, because for a theory to become a full motivation theory, both the *direction* as well as the *energetic basis* of human behavior needs to be conceptually addressed (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Elliot, 1997). That is, to provide a full account of individuals’ motivational functioning, one needs to know not only *where* individuals are moving towards, but also *why* they are choosing a particular direction. Clearly, achievement goals themselves are indicative of the direction of
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individuals’ functioning in a particular achievement situation. For instance, a student is oriented towards doing better than she did before during exams or a tennis player is focused on outperforming her opponent during the game. Yet, these goals do not emerge from a vacuum, but instead need to be energized, that is, a source needs to be identified from where achievement aims spring up and get fuelled with energy. Consideration of the motive to succeed and the motive to avoid failure enabled achievement goal theorists to incorporate the energizing basis of goal-directed motivated action.

Previous work indicates that the need for achievement, as an appetitive form of motivation, is related to the adoption of mastery-approach goals, whereas fear of failure, as an avoidance form of motivation, is related to performance-avoidance goals (Elliot & Church, 1997; Tanaka & Yamauchi, 2001). Interestingly, and in contrast to Atkinson’s original view that fear of failure is inhibitory (Atkinson & Feather, 1966), both the need for achievement and fear of failure have been found to relate to performance-approach goals, suggesting that performance-approach goals can be instigated by different distal motivational dispositions (Elliot & Church, 1997). Subsequent studies incorporating more sophisticated statistical analyses (e.g., Elliot & Murayama, 2008; Zusho, Pintrich, & Cortina, 2005) have replicated this pattern of relations. These studies have further shown that achievement goals help to explain the relation between need for achievement and fear of failure (as distal motives) and motivational outcomes. For example, some previous studies (e.g., Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009) found mastery-approach goals alone to partially intervene in the relation between need for achievement and meta-cognitive or learning strategies, while other studies (e.g., Diseth & Kobbeltveldt, 2010) found both mastery-approach and performance-approach goals to play an intervening role.

Towards Conceptual Precision: Detaching Reasons from Aims
A third and less visible evolution in the achievement goal literature involves the movement towards greater conceptual precision. This change gets very much to the heart of the achievement goal construct itself, as the change is definitional in nature. Specifically, Elliot and his collaborators (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008) have proposed a shift in the definition of achievement goals, arguing in favor of a more narrow definition of the goal concept. This change implies an important deviation from the theorizing and empirical work of the founders of the achievement goal construct. Although coming from different backgrounds, Dweck and Nicholls adopted a relatively broad definition of achievement goals, also labeled an achievement goal orientation (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). From their viewpoint, an achievement goal consisted of an agglomerate of different, yet related competence-based processes, including aims, reasons, feelings and, in some cases, even attributions (see Ames & Archer, 1987). Stated differently, achievement goals were conceived of as omnibus constructs (Murayama et al., 2011).

To illustrate the broad view on achievement goals, when performance-oriented, one would be focused on outperforming others to demonstrate one’s worth and to validate one’s ego. This goal would be best achieved when the “maximin principle” is respected, that is, when one is capable of garnering a maximum of results within a minimum amount of time and with a minimum of effort-expenditure. Further, when facing failure, performance-oriented individuals are said to protect their ego by attributing the failure to external factors (Nicholls, 1984). In contrast, when mastery-oriented, one is focused on mastering the requirements of the task at hand and effort-expenditure is perceived as integral to one’s goal pursuit (Nicholls, 1984). Failure is not a problem, as any mistakes are perceived as informational, that is, as contributing to a better mastering of the task at hand. A central emphasis that characterizes a mastery orientation is curiosity and challenge seeking, as one is curious to learn or to be challenged to master the material at hand.
As these illustrative descriptions suggest, when achievement goals are conceived of as *orientations*, various processes are considered to be highly interconnected and operate interdependently, which allows for a rich and dynamic account of individuals’ achievement goal strivings. Also, these Gestalt-like descriptions match very well with many practitioners’ observations of people’s functioning in achievement settings.

Yet, this *macro-approach* of the definition of achievement goals may also entail a number of disadvantages (see also Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). One potential pitfall is that many achievement goal scholars do not take a clear stance on the *core* elements of the achievement goal construct. Second, because these core elements are not clearly elucidated, the operationalization of this omnibus achievement goal becomes very difficult. In fact, a recent meta-analysis by Hulleman et al. (2010) precisely pointed to the variable operationalization of achievement goals, showing that depending on which aspects of this omnibus goal construct were assessed, the correlates of achievement goals were different. For instance, performance-approach goals were found to yield a positive relation with achievement in cases when their assessment was limited to the pursuit of normative standards as such, whereas they yielded a negative relation with achievement in cases when ego-validation concerns were part of the operationalization (e.g., “My goal is to outperform others to prove my ability”). To put it bluntly, the current operationalizations of achievement goal orientations (as with many constructs in psychology) are a mess, as they fail to adequately map onto their intended facets (Hulleman et al., 2010).

Third, because different aspects of the omnibus goal construct are often operationalized *simultaneously* it remains unclear which aspects are driving the observed effects. For instance, a performance-approach goal item such as “I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my ability to others” (Vandewalle, 1997) contains multiple aspects, including a choice component (“I prefer”), a normative component (“others’ achievements”)
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and a self-validating component (“proving ability”). Similarly, a mastery-approach goal item like “An important reason why I do my class work is because I like to learn new things” (Midgley et al., 1998) yields both a reference to a particular goal (“learning new things”) and a reason for doing so (“I like”). To gain more precise insight into which of these components are driving the observed (lack of) associations with outcomes, it is critical to identify the core element of the achievement goal construct and to separately assess the additional aspects so as to study their independent contribution in the prediction of outcomes. Therefore, rather than a macro-approach, a micro-approach is needed.

Fourth, because variable aspects of the omnibus goal construct have been operationalized, incomplete or even inaccurate suggestions for practice may be formulated. For instance, the majority of achievement goal researchers have argued that mastery goals are conducive to learning, yet, this message might at least in part be driven by the way mastery goals have been operationalized (Benita, Roth, & Deci, 2012).

For these reasons, we follow Elliot and collaborators’ (Elliot & Thrash, 2001) call to disentangle the omnibus goal construct. Given the competence-based nature of achievement goals, the core of the construct should be defined according to competence-based dimensions. As noted above, to date two dimensions have been highlighted as being particularly relevant, that is, (a) the way competence is defined (task-based, intrapersonal, normative) and (b) the way competence is valenced (i.e., negatively or positively). The identification of these two critical dimensions leads to a more narrow definition of the achievement goal construct. That is, after crossing both dimensions, it becomes apparent that the central aspect of the construct is the aim that one pursues. The combination of the definition and valence dimension of competence leads to the identification of six different achievement aims, which are graphically presented in Figure 1. In the remainder of the manuscript, we will use the labels task-based, intrapersonal and normative goals in reference to our proposed extension of the
achievement goal literature as these labels better convey the idea that the achievement goals are differentiated based on the standard used to define competence.

By restricting the definition of achievement goals only to how competence is defined and valenced, a further consequence is that various other features that were considered part of the omnibus goal construct, including underlying motives or reasons, get removed from the concept all together. Notably, because contemporary achievement goal researchers vary considerably in whether they perceive this conceptual change as positive or as an unfortunate deviation from the original conceptualization, the term *Achievement Goal Approach* was introduced (Elliot, 2005). So, rather than representing a unified theory, the achievement goal literature is currently characterized by a variety of related, yet in important ways different, perspectives. Although some achievement goal scholars may perceive this conceptual shift as an impoverishment of the concept, we suggest there is much to be gained by doing so. In fact, the argument we put forward in this article is that the removal of the underlying motives or reasons from achievement goals in favor of an exclusive focus on the aims opens the door for a more systematic examination of the *regulatory basis* of achievement goals, which leads to Proposition One.

**Propositions**

**Proposition One: The Articulation of the “Why” of Achievement Goals Provides an Account of its Regulatory Basis**

Although achievement goals indicate the direction of individuals’ strivings in achievement settings, the setting and pursuit of these goals need to be *regulated* ongoingly. Herein, we maintain that this regulatory basis can differ substantially depending on the *type* of reason underlying one’s pursuit of achievement goals. For instance, a student could focus on keeping up with her exam scores of last year (achievement aim) to prove that she is an intelligent person or to avoid the criticism of her parents (regulation). Similarly, a volleyball
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player could focus on outperforming his or her opponent (achievement aim) because of the bonuses that are contingent on the outcome of the game or simply because he or she perceives competition as a challenge (regulation).

In this respect, achievement aims constitute the “what” of achievement goals, while their underlying reasons constitute the “why” of achievement goals (see also Deci & Ryan, 2000; Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Sheldon, Ryan, Kasser, & Deci, 2004). The critical point is that when achievement goals are treated as omnibus constructs, thereby failing to distinguish between aims and reasons, the regulatory basis of achievement goals cannot be considered separately. A further consequence of the comingling of the “what” and “why” of achievement goals is that the reasons underlying achievement goals are treated in a homogeneous way, that is, each of the achievement goals would by definition be guided by one single type of underlying reason. Specifically, normative goals would by definition be pursued to validate one’s ego and self-worth, while task-based goals would be freed of any ego-validation concerns. Yet, this does not need to be case. Once achievement goals are restricted to aims as such, it becomes clear that these aims can be guided by diverse reasons. For instance, one could be focused on outperforming peers on an entrance exam for medical school to validate one’s ego, but also because one personally values becoming a medical doctor. Further, ego-concerns cannot only be the driving force behind the goal to outperform others, but are often also guiding people’s attempts to keep up with their past performances or even to master the requirements of a task.

These examples illustrate that the removal of the “reason-aspect” from the core concept of the achievement goal construct does not imply its abandonment. On the contrary, this removal opens the door for a more systematic consideration of a diversity of reasons underlying achievement aims. Such an approach also better fits with reality, as many individuals pursuing the same achievement goals may have fairly different reasons for doing so.
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so (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). In addition, different achievement goals could also be motivated by the same underlying reason, a possibility that cannot be recognized when aims and reasons are not clearly separated. Of course, the conceptual isolation and separation of the reasons underlying achievement goals from achievement goals brings new challenges. The most pressing question at this moment is perhaps how these underlying reasons are best conceptualized, which leads us to Proposition Two.

**Proposition Two: The Articulation of the “Why” of Achievement Goal Pursuit Opens the Possibility to Insert Other Motivational Frameworks**

Separating the reasons underlying achievement goals from the aims per se opens the possibility to conceptualize reasons making use of other prevailing theories in the motivation literature. One motivation theory that is well-suited for this purpose is Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000a), a well-validated theory on optimal motivation, wellness, and personality functioning. Beginning with the classic distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975), the theory has been refined by distinguishing different types of extrinsic motivation, such that the differentiation between controlled and autonomous regulation is now well-accepted (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

Controlled regulation has two subcomponents, that is, (a) external regulation, which refers to engaging in an activity to meet external expectations, to obtain promised rewards, or to avoid sanctions and (b) introjected regulation, which refers to engaging in activity to avoid feelings of guilt or shame or to bolster one’s ego (Assor, Vansteenkiste, & Kaplan, 2009). Although both types of controlled regulation come with feelings of pressure, they differ with respect to their originating source: whereas the pressure is clearly coming from the outside in the case of external regulation (as the term implies), people put themselves under pressure in the case of introjected regulation. That is, the initially external source of regulation and
pressure has been taken in and is now applied intrapsychically. This process of partial internalization can be derived etymologically from the term introjection, which, in Latin, is composed of the words ‘in’ or ‘inside’ and ‘jacere’ or ‘to throw’ (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). Thus, the regulatory basis of the behavior has almost literally been thrown inside; yet, little psychological work has been carried out to further transform this internally pressing form of regulation into one that is more personally adhered to. Instead, when introjected, a person still functions in an internally conflicted and rigid way, as s/he feels pressured to attain certain outcomes.

Autonomous regulation involves acting in a more unified and volitional way and also includes different subcomponents. The prototypical example of autonomous functioning is intrinsic motivation, which refers to engagement in an activity because it is fun, interesting, exciting or challenging. Even if interest in the activity at hand is absent, one can still engage in the behavior willingly, at least if one perceives the activity as personally meaningful (identified regulation) or when the activity is seen as being consistent with other personally held ideals and values (integrated regulation). In these cases, one will be committed to the activity because the reason for enacting the behavior has been accepted (i.e., internalized), such that the regulation of the activity occurs more willingly. Autonomous and controlled regulation represent two qualitatively different modes of functioning, with controlled regulation more easily consuming limited energetic resources and autonomous regulation being conducive to feelings of vigor and energy, as one is basically doing what one really wants to do (Moller, Ryan, & Deci, 1996).

There are literally hundreds of studies across various life domains, including work, sports, psychotherapy, education and health care that provide empirical support for the autonomy-control distinction (see Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, et al., 2010 for an overview). Yet, the vast majority of past and ongoing work has examined people’s autonomous and controlled
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reasons for engaging in a particular behavior. Although it has been argued that the different types of regulation can also be applied to the way people regulate the setting and pursuit of their goals (e.g., Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011), comparatively fewer studies have addressed this possibility empirically. In a number of studies conducted within the context of the self-concordance model (e.g., Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), participants were instructed to self-generate their personal goals and were then asked to rate a number of standardized questions why they were pursuing each of their goals. The motives represented participants’ autonomous (or self-concordant) and controlled (or disconcordant) motives as articulated within SDT. Overall, these studies showed that the more participants’ personal goals were regulated autonomously rather than in a controlled fashion, the higher the likelihood they attained their goals, which, in turn, related to higher well-being. Such findings have been replicated in a variety of domains, including work (e.g., Greguras & Diefendorf, 2010), psychotherapy (e.g., Michalak, Klappheck, & Kosfelder, 2004), and sports (e.g., Smith, Ntoumanis, Duda, & Vansteenkiste, 2011).

Herein, we argue that the autonomous-controlled distinction is also useful to consider the regulatory basis of achievement goals, at least when achievement goals are defined purely in terms of standards and aims. As shown in Table 2, each of the achievement goals in the 3x2 framework can be regulated by relatively more autonomous or controlled motives. To illustrate, a learner could focus on avoiding doing worse than his peers (performance-avoidance goal) because he would feel ashamed if he would fail (controlled motive) or because being the worst performing students in his class would seriously hamper his future career (autonomous motive). A marathon runner could be focused on improving her personal best running time because this would give a serious boost to her ego (controlled motive) or because she sees the race as an exciting challenge (autonomous motive). Finally, an employee could be focused on mastering a new software program because his boss expects him to do so
as quickly as possible (controlled motive) or because he is really interested in the new software program (autonomous motive).

To operationalize the theoretical notion that achievement goals can be undergirded by autonomous or controlled motives, Vansteenkiste et al. (2010) introduced a method of assessment that somewhat follows the format developed by Sheldon and colleagues in their self-concordance model. In this method of assessment, participants are given a set of achievement goal items that assess the strength of their endorsement of a particular achievement aim (e.g., “My aim is to outperform others”). These items need to be “pure”, that is, uncontaminated with aspects (i.e., reasons) that are peripheral to the achievement goal construct. In a second step, participants were provided with items tapping into the reasons why they would adopt the particular achievement goal. These items reflected both autonomous and controlled reasons. This approach allows for the creation of separate scores for participants’ strength of achievement goal pursuit and for the autonomous and controlled reasons for pursuing the achievement goal. Accordingly, this approach allows for a simultaneous investigation of the “what” of goal pursuit, which varies in strength or intensity, and the “why” of goal pursuit, which varies by type of motivation (autonomous or controlled).

Having discussed the theoretical possibility that achievement goals can be driven by different motivations and the operationalization of this possibility, we would like to make four additional points to clarify our position. First, although these diverse motives might undergird different achievement goal strivings, it is certainly possible that some achievement goals are – on average – motivated in a particular way. For instance, on average avoidance goals may be relatively more controlled and less autonomous in nature compared to approach goals (e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1998).

Second, some of the motives discerned within SDT are reminiscent of, if not completely overlapping with, the reasons that are said to guide performance- and mastery-
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based goal pursuits when one conceives of achievement goals as an omnibus construct. Specifically, the ego-involving character of performance goals (Nicholls, 1984) is similar to an introjected mode of functioning in SDT. In fact, ego-involvement is considered as a prototypical example of introjected regulation (Ryan, 1982; Niemiec, Ryan, & Brown, 2008). Also, the inherent pleasure, curiosity, and challenge-seeking typical of intrinsic motivation have often been conceived of as the underlying motives for a mastery-orientation within the omnibus goal viewpoint (Nicholls, 1984). So, what do we gain by taking out these reasons and subsequently putting them back in? The added value is that ego-concerns and intrinsic pleasure are now conceived as one particular type rather than as the only or exclusive type of motives that underlie performance-based and mastery-based goals, respectively.

Third, although achievement aims are inherently competence-based, this need not be the case for their underlying reasons. Some of these reasons yield a reference to competence, whereas others do not (see also Urdan & Mestas, 2006). For instance, proving one’s ability to validate one’s self-worth (introjected motive) is a competence-related motive, but pursuing an achievement goal to obtain a promised reward or bonus is not competence-based. Yet, we maintain that this does not invalidate it as a motive to be examined. On the contrary, the removal of motives underlying achievement goals from the core concept of achievement goals was done precisely because some of these reasons were not competence-based, while the goal concept itself needs to be grounded in competence (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). Moreover, if the underlying motives are restricted to competence-based motives, one does not fully actualize the potential that was created by separating reasons from achievement aims. The disentanglement of reasons and aims precisely enables researchers to consider a broad variety of underlying motives. For this reason, we also refrain from using the term achievement motive when speaking about the autonomous and controlled motives underlying achievement goals, a term that is reserved for the concepts of need for achievement and fear of failure. Yet,
we do use the term achievement goals, precisely because the aims themselves are, by definition, grounded in competence.

Fourth, the autonomous-controlled distinction within SDT just represents one way to conceptualize the reasons underlying achievement goals. Other scholars have used related, yet somewhat different operationalizations of the “why” of achievement goals. Through qualitative interviews, Urdan and Mestas (2006) found out that performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals can be undergirded by one the following four categories: appearance-approach, appearance-avoidance, competition-approach, and competition-avoidance. Further, Dompnier, Darnon, and Butera (2009) showed that the pursuit of mastery goals to garner teachers’ attention (social desirability) or to succeed at the university (social utility) altered the relation between mastery goal pursuit and achievement. Specifically, mastery goals related positively to achievement when first-year college students scored low on social desirability and high on social utility reasons. Clearly, these two sets of reasons shared conceptual overlap with some of the motives within SDT. Specifically, social desirability reasons and external regulation both share a focus on pursuing an achievement goal to meet external criteria (controlled regulation), while a social utility reason reflects the more personal value of the achievement goal such that learners could come to identify with the goal (autonomous regulation).

**Proposition Three: The Reasons Underlying Achievement Goals Matter on Top of the Strength of Achievement Goal Pursuit**

On the basis of SDT we argue that autonomous and controlled regulations behind the pursuit of achievement goals will relate differentially to cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes and that they will predict variance in those outcomes in addition to the variance explained by the strength of the endorsement of achievement goals per se. Specifically, the two different underlying motivational regulations of achievement goals may alter the
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*functional significance* or the *attributed meaning* of the goal (Deci & Ryan, 1985). That is, when regulated by controlled motives, the achievement goal would be experienced in a more evaluative and pressuring way, as individuals would have the impression that their (lack of) progress and attainment of a particular achievement goal would reflect on their self-worth. In contrast, when regulated by autonomous motives, the informational value of the goal would be made more salient, as the goal would be seen as a way to provide guidance to one’s functioning and as a “helpful tool” to be challenged and to promote growth. As a result of this differentially attributed meaning, the different types of goal regulation would relate differentially to satisfaction of the basic psychological need for autonomy which, in SDT, is defined as the need to experience a sense of choice and psychological freedom (versus experiencing pressure). As a consequence of their differential associations with the need for autonomy, the two types of regulations of achievement goals would relate differentially to outcomes, with an autonomous regulation relating to relatively more adaptive behaviors, cognitions, and emotions than a controlled regulation.

From the SDT-perspective, two other basic psychological needs have been formulated, that is, the need for competence (i.e., experiencing a sense of effectiveness) and the need for relatedness (i.e., experiencing a sense of warmth). Although the two types of regulations of achievement goals may relate primarily differently to the need for autonomy, we argue that they may also relate differentially to these two other needs. That is, an autonomous goal regulation would be conducive to activity absorption, which would allow for better skill development. Also, the controlled regulation of at least some achievement goals may yield a relational cost, as others would be more likely to be perceived as obstacles to be removed so that one can achieve one’s goals.

A number of studies have tested the hypothesis that the two types of regulations would relate differentially to outcomes and would explain incremental variance beyond the effect of
achievement goals per se. Using the approach described in the preceding paragraph, Vansteenkiste, Smeets et al. (2010) focused exclusively on learners’ normative-approach (i.e., performance-approach) goals, as these goals are the ones that are most heavily debated in the achievement goal literature (Brophy, 2005; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Senko et al., 2011). They reasoned that the type of reasons why individuals adopt a normative-approach goal may relate to their pattern of outcomes above and beyond the strength of endorsing normative-approach goals. Across two cross-sectional studies, they obtained strong evidence for this claim, with reasons accounting for incremental variance in all 17 measured outcomes after having inserted normative-approach goal strength in a first step in a hierarchical regression analysis. Autonomous and controlled reasons underlying normative-approach goals were found to matter for a diversity of critical aspects of the learning process. First, whereas controlled regulation of normative-approach goals yielded a negative relation to individuals’ global scholastic attitude, autonomous regulation of normative-approach goals yielded a positive relation. Second, both types of regulation were related differentially to the way individuals engaged in the learning process and their level of absorption during the learning process. Specifically, autonomous regulation related to better planning and time management, a more absorbed approach to the learning activity, and a greater selection of main ideas while learning, while a controlled regulation generally yielded the opposite pattern. Moreover, when facing obstacles, autonomously regulated normative-approach goals were predictive of greater persistence to overcoming problems, while pressure to outperform others related to giving up more easily. Third, presumably because of the poorer preparation for tests precipitated by the controlled regulation of normative-approach goals, and due to the experienced pressure to outperform others on the test, controlled regulation also related to more test anxiety and lower objective achievement.
Two additional findings need highlighting. First, the initially observed associations between the strength of normative-approach goals per se and learning outcomes fell below significance after controlling for reasons for the majority of outcomes, suggesting that the reasons underlying normative-approach goals may be comparatively more critical in predicting outcomes than the strength of normative-approach pursuit as such. Second, the observed associations between the reasons underlying normative-approach goals and outcomes remained largely significant after controlling for the strength of task-approach goals as well. This suggests that the effects of the “why” of normative-approach goals are not reducible to or cannot be explained away by the endorsement of another achievement goal.

Consideration of the reasons underlying normative-approach goals is not only critical for individuals’ learning outcomes, but generalizes to their moral functioning as well. Specifically, Vansteenkiste, Smeets et al. (2010) reported that controlled regulation of normative-approach goals related to a more tolerant attitude towards cheating and to more self-reported cheating, while the opposite pattern emerged for autonomous regulation of normative-approach goals. Thus, when placed under pressure to beat another person, individuals might go to great lengths to achieve their desired goal and do not seem to hesitate to rely on unethical strategies to fulfill their ambitions.

A similar pattern of findings was obtained in a subsequent study conducted with two samples of soccer players (Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, & Lens, 2010). An essential aspect of sports involves competing with others. As such, the question can be raised whether competition puts people at risk for behaving unfairly or whether such behaviors would rather be predicted by the reasons underlying one’s engagement in competitive contexts. Across both samples, controlled regulation of normative-approach goals, but not the strength of normative-approach goals, was associated with more antisocial behavior on the soccer pitch. The reason that controlled regulation of normative-approach goals related to more aggressive
play was that pressure related to a more objectifying attitude towards one’s opponent (Bandura, 1999; Haslam, 2006). Specifically, when placed under pressure, one is more likely to reduce one’s opponent on the field to an object or a barrier that needs to be removed, if necessary by all possible means. The adoption of such an attitude was found to lower the threshold for aggressing against players on the other team, thus serving as a rationalization for aggressive behavior. Such a pattern of findings did not emerge with autonomously regulated normative-approach goals. On the contrary, autonomous regulation has been found to be positively predictive of female soccer and netball players’ prosocial behaviors, both towards their own teammates, as well as towards rivals (Michou, Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, & Lens, 2012). In addition to relating to these behavioral outcomes, the pursuit of normative-approach goals for autonomous reasons was found to relate to positive affect and vitality, while the controlled regulation of normative-approach goals related to negative affect (Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis et al., 2010).

A third set of studies (Gaudreau et al., in press; Michou et al., 2012) addressed the reasons underlying other achievement goals than normative-approach goals. Specifically, Michou et al. (2012) reported that the autonomous and controlled reasons underlying both task-approach and normative-avoidance goals in a sample of Greek learners related to self-regulated learning above and beyond the strength of endorsing the achievement goals per se. Whereas normative-approach goals were found to yield minimal unique relations with learning outcomes after controlling for their underlying reasons (Vansteenkiste, Smeets et al., 2010), task-approach goals uniquely predicted learning outcomes, suggesting that both the “what” and “why” component mattered with regard to task-approach goals.

Further, Gaudreau et al. (in press) also reported that autonomous, relative to controlled, regulation also matters for task-approach goals. Relying on the same assessment approach used in the Vansteenkiste et al. studies, they examined, in addition to the main
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effects of achievement goal strength and underlying regulation, their interactive contribution. In addition to the main effect of the relative autonomous regulation of both task-approach and normative-approach goals, they reported systematic evidence for an interaction between the “what” and “why” of achievement goals. Specifically, they found that the pursuit of MAp goals was only conducive to learning outcomes when the task-approach goals were regulated autonomously. Similarly, the pursuit of normative-approach goals only related negatively to learning outcomes when the normative-approach goals were regulated in a controlled manner.

In a subsequent study in the educational domain (Deschacht, 2012), the dominant goal approach (Van Yperen, 2006) was used to assess learners’ achievement goals. Specifically, participants were asked to compare different achievement goals (i.e., normative-approach, normative-avoidance, intrapersonal-approach, intrapersonal-avoidance) in a pairwise fashion and to rank order them in terms of assigned importance. Subsequently, only the reasons for pursuing their dominant goal were assessed. The reason for shifting towards this dominant goal approach was that participants often have one achievement goal that is most salient to them. It is relatively less relevant to tap into reasons for pursuing a less valued goal, as these goals are less psychologically salient. Similar to previous studies, Deschacht (2012) found that autonomous regulation of learners’ dominant achievement goal yielded a multitude of learning benefits, including challenge appraisals of exams and greater achievement. In contrast, controlled regulation of one’s dominant achievement goal was linked to a perception of exams as threatening and to greater test anxiety. After examining the main effects of autonomous and controlled regulation of achievement goals across all participants (i.e., regardless of their selected dominant goal), subsequent interaction analyses allowed us to investigate whether the regulation would yield a different effect depending on learners’ chosen dominant goal. This did not appear to be the case, as none of the inserted interactions
was found to be significant. This suggests that the observed associations of autonomous and controlled regulation to the learning outcomes applied equally to all dominant goal types.

Next, this same dominant goal approach was used by Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Van Riet, Aelterman, and Soenens (2012) in a six-week longitudinal study on volleyball players. Each week, volleyball players rated their game-specific dominant achievement goals, their game-specific autonomous and controlling reasons, and a number of outcomes including game enjoyment, performance satisfaction, and prosocial and antisocial behavior. Rather than adopting the more classic between-person approach (but see Gernigon, Arripe-Longueville, Delignières, & Ninot, 2004), this design allowed to examine intra-individual (week-to-week) fluctuations in the goals, their underlying reasons, and the outcomes. Extending previous work, within-person variability in the reasons underlying one’s dominant achievement goal related to within-person variability in a host of outcomes. During games when volleyball players were regulating their dominant achievement goal autonomously, they experienced the game as more enjoyable, were more satisfied with their performance, and reported engaging in more prosocial behavior. During games in which their dominant goal was regulated in controlled fashion, they reported more antisocial behavior, not only toward their opponents but also toward their own teammates. Notably, these effects emerged after controlling for the outcome of the game (i.e., loss vs. win). Goal-strength accounted for little unique variance in the outcomes once underlying motives were controlled for; only endorsement of game-specific task-approach endorsement related to more game-enjoyment.

This within-person study design lends considerable credence to the added value of considering people’s underlying regulation of their achievement goals. This is because the regulatory basis of achievement goals can fluctuate considerably, not only between people, but also within a single person as a function of the type of social environment one is exposed to. Thus, by considering the type of regulation underlying one’s achievement goals, new
opportunities are created to study people’s achievement goals in a more *dynamic* fashion (see also Murayama et al., 2011).

To summarize, the following four conclusions can be drawn from the research on reasons underlying achievement goals conducted thus far. First, the autonomous and controlled regulation of achievement goals matters in terms of predicting outcomes above and beyond the strength of endorsing achievement goals as such. In several studies, it even appears that the regulatory basis (i.e., “why”) of achievement goals accounts for more variance in the studied outcomes than the strength of achievement goals (i.e., “what”). More research is needed, however, to examine the independent contribution of the “what” and the “why” of achievement goals. Second, these underlying reasons have been found to matter for both mastery-based and performance-based achievement goals. This is interesting because the study of the regulatory basis of achievement goals may at first seem primarily applicable to normative goals, but the data indicate that even mastery-based goals can become regulated in a controlled manner. For instance, a child may feel pressure from his mother to master at least some of his assigned homework tasks. Third, the autonomous and controlled regulation of achievement goals matters in predicting diverse outcomes (e.g., type of learning, time management, moral functioning) and in diverse achievement domains (i.e., education, sports), underscoring the robustness of this distinction. Fourth, these different regulations not only vary between people, but also vary within people over time, with resulting consequences for people’s psychological functioning.

**Proposition Four: Consideration of the Reasons Underlying Achievement Goals Allows for the Study of a Richer Set of Contextual Forces Influencing Motivation**

Consideration of the reasons underlying achievement goals not only affords better prediction of outcomes, it also allows one to consider a broader and, hence, richer set of contextual forces that influence people’s motivation in achievement settings. The types of
goals encouraged by the social environment, known under the label achievement goal structures (Ames, 1992), have been hypothesized and shown to predict the types of goals adopted and endorsed by individuals (Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). For instance, Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan (1996) found that mastery-goal structures related to a stronger adoption of mastery goals, while performance-goal structures related to the adoption of performance goals. By considering the quality of the motives regulating the achievement goals, it becomes important to also incorporate the qualitatively different ways in which these goals are communicated and presented. An interesting feature of SDT is that it makes clear predictions about how socialization figures’ (e.g., teachers, parents, and coaches) interpersonal style relates to individuals’ quality of motivation. Specifically, it is predicted that an autonomy-supportive style would foster autonomous motivation and that a controlling style would foster relatively more controlled motivation (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010).

Autonomy-supportive practices involve taking the frame of reference of the other person, the provision of desired choice, communication of the necessity and personal relevance of the introduced goals, and building in challenges (Reeve, 2009). A controlling approach involves pressuring others to act, think, or feel in particular ways, thereby essentially ignoring the other person’s viewpoint and instead imposing one’s own agenda. This could be achieved through the use of more externally pressuring strategies, such as the promise of rewards, the threat of sanctions, or internally controlling strategies (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), such as conditional regard, guilt-induction, or shaming. Consistent with a wealth of studies showing that autonomy-supportive and controlling interpersonal styles indeed relate differentially to the quality of individuals’ motivational regulation (e.g., Grolnick et al., 1997; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), we argue that the style of introducing and monitoring people’s progress towards achievement goals will relate to the way
achievement goals get regulated (i.e., autonomous or controlled). This is graphically displayed in Figure 3.

A few examples might be helpful. A teacher could, for instance, emphasize to children that it is important for them to gradually make progress in their reading skills over the semester. Yet, she may convey this intrapersonal goal in a number of different ways. Some teachers may rely on pressuring strategies, such as the use of contingent rewards or threatening sanctions to pressure the children to make sufficient progress. Other teachers may try to explain the value of such intra-individual progress and present this intrapersonal goal in a more dialogical way, or they might provide choice to the children by allowing them to set their own intra-personal goals, enabling children to fully endorse the goal and autonomously regulate it. Similarly, after a series of subsequent losses, a coach could emphasize the importance of not losing the upcoming competitive game during his pep talk, yet this normative-avoidance goal could be communicated in various ways. Some coaches may put pressure on the players to avoid losing, saying for instance: “It is time to stand up and prove your ability! Players who are not performing well will be substituted and there will be no exception.” However, there is room for a coach to communicate this normative-avoidance goal in a more autonomy-supportive way, saying for instance, that it might not be easy to avoid a loss, but that the players could view this as a challenge.

One issue that may arise at this point is the question whether being autonomy-supportive automatically means that socializing agents leave it up to the individual to decide which goals to pursue. Stated otherwise, when socializing agents promote a particular achievement goal, are they then by definition low on autonomy-support? In this respect, it is important to clarify that autonomy-support does not imply a permissive approach, characterized by unlimited freedom (Reeve, Jang, & Deci, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., in press). Autonomy-supportive agents can regulate people’s behavior by pointing toward a
particular direction (i.e., a normative goal), yet there is space for different ways of communicating this direction of behavior. For instance, a socializing agent could present a normative goal as the only desirable goal to be pursued and leave no room for dialogue, in which case they would come across as fairly controlling. Yet, the same achievement goal could also be explained with a meaningful rationale and the person’s feelings regarding the goal could be validated, such that the person more fully endorses the goal and the proposed aspirations. Moreover, although individuals may not be given choice in the type of goal to pursue, thus being denied option-choice, they could be afforded action-choice, that is, choice regarding the level at which the goal is set and regarding how and when the goal could be achieved (Reeve, Nix, & Ham, 2003).

There is some evidence for the importance of the way that achievement goals are communicated. First, Reeve and Deci (1996) showed that being pressured to outperform an opponent when working on an interesting puzzle solving task leads to less subsequent intrinsic motivation compared to when one is competing against one’s opponent under more informational circumstances. Second, similar findings were reported in a correlational study by Ciani, Middleton, Summers, and Sheldon (2010) who found that a normative-approach classroom structure was no longer negatively related to students’ personal task-approach goal adoption when students experienced their teachers as autonomy-supportive. Third, Spray, Wang, Biddle, and Chatzisarantis (2006) experimentally induced either a task-approach or a normative-approach goal in golfers, crossing goal induction with an autonomy-supportive or more controlling style to communicate these goals. They reported a main effect of both goal-induction and communication style (but no interaction effect), with golfers being instructed in an autonomy-supportive, relative to controlling, way reporting greater enjoyment, persisting longer and performing better, and those placed in the task-approach, relative to the normative-approach, goal condition performing better (presumably, the way that golfers regulated their
achievement goals was quite different, although the authors did not directly assess participants’ reasons behind their goal pursuit. Finally, a recent study by Benita et al. (2012) found that experimental variation in the way an intrapersonal goal was introduced affected participants’ sense of choice and enjoyment. Specifically, an autonomy-supportive, relative to a controlling, introduction led to more positive emotional experiences. This pattern of findings was replicated in a subsequent self-report study (Benita et al., 2012), showing that the association between task-based goals and intrinsic enjoyment was stronger when learners experienced a sense of choice in their classroom. Together then, there is growing evidence for the claim that the style of encouraging achievement goals yields a differential relation to outcomes, presumably because different styles activate different types of regulation.

Yet, many issues still need to be sorted out. For instance, most research to date has focused on the style of introducing or encouraging achievement goals, but no attention has been paid to the way socializing agents monitor individuals’ goal progress nor to the way they provide feedback on goal attainment (or the lack thereof). Again, there is considerable variation in the way this can be done. For instance, a teacher could more closely monitor the progress of a child with reading difficulties out of distrust that she is not reading spontaneously by herself, or because she is truly concerned or is curious to see how the child is doing so as to provide help if needed (see Enzle & Anderson, 1993). Also, the way that socializing agents respond to ultimate goal attainment could vary, with some displaying conditional positive feedback (e.g., “I’m glad you finally made some progress. That is what I was hoping for”; Ryan, 1982) and others providing unconditional positive feedback (e.g., “It is really nice you made some progress”). Although the socializing agent provides positive feedback in both instances, it is clear that the person feels pressured to keep up with her advanced level and is expected to make more progress when the positive feedback is contingent. Along similar lines, the style of providing corrective feedback after insufficient or
lack of goal attainment could be either fairly harsh, demeaning and controlling or more informational, considerate and autonomy-supportive (Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

A second issue that needs to be sorted out is whether, as can be derived from Figure 3, a particular style of introducing and monitoring achievement goals strengthens or rather decreases their pursuit over the shorter or longer time. Thus, if a socializing agent were to use pressure in introducing a particular achievement goal, one might temporarily get more strongly focused on the goal, yet, begin to give up the goal-striving over time. This is because the controlled regulation of achievement goals would take more energy (Ryan & Fredericks, 1997). Along similar lines, it is possible that some promoted goal-structures not only relate to the strength of goal-striving but also elicit a particular regulatory style. A teacher who is emphasizing the importance of not doing worse than others may not only prompt children to endorse normative-avoidance goals but may also provoke a controlled regulation. These are intriguing questions in our view, as such work shows that, in addition to competence dynamics, which are the central focus within the achievement goal literature, dynamics of autonomy also need to be taken into account to understand when and why people are thriving in achievement settings or failing to actualize their potential.

**Proposition Five: Consideration of the Reasons Underlying Achievement Goals Sets the Stage for an Enriched Hierarchical Model of Achievement Motivation**

In addition to studying contextual antecedents of the regulation of achievement goals, recent research (Michou et al., 2012) has started to devote attention to personality features that may relate to the “why” of achievement goals. Michou et al. (2012) argued that incorporating the reasons underlying participants’ achievement goals would allow for an enrichment of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation. Specifically, the point was made that the antecedents identified within the hierarchical model would not only be
predictive of the type of achievement goals one adopts (“what”), but also of the underlying reasons (“why”) for one’s achievement goal pursuit (see Figure 3). Particular attention was paid to the motive to succeed and the motive to avoid failure, two between-person variables that have been found to instigate the pursuit of achievement goals.

As the term *motive* can be used in reference to both the antecedents of goals (e.g., motive to succeed) and to the regulation of achievement goals (e.g., an autonomous motive), Michou et al. (2012) coined the terms *distal* and *proximal* motives to differentiate both sets of concepts. Given that the motive to succeed and to avoid failure serve as energizing antecedents of achievement aims and their regulatory basis, they are said to play a more *distal* role. That is, they would predict which achievement goals one adopts across achievement settings and how one regulates these achievement goals, but these motives would be less prone to contextual influences. Instead, as maintained by Atkinson (1964), these motives are acquired through a socialization history in which one has, for instance, learned to positively value success. Thus, these distal motives represent relatively stable interpersonal difference variables that may interact with the social context.

These features contrast with the features of *proximal* motives, as they are said to be more susceptible to contextual influences and, hence, to also be characterized by more within-person fluctuation (Mouratidis, et al., 2012). The term ‘proximal’ refers to the fact that these motives are directly tied, that is, proximally connected, to the achievement goals themselves and thus serve as the regulatory basis of one’s achievement goals. Although distal motives such as the need for achievement and fear of failure are said to predict proximal motives underlying achievement goals, immediate contextual factors should yield an incremental impact on these proximal motives. This is because these proximal motives are more susceptible to contextual change.
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Thus, the claimed enrichment of the hierarchical model by Michou et al. (2012) precisely involved the consideration that distal motives not only get channeled through more specific achievement goals but *concomitantly* also instigate a proximal motive underlying one’s achievement goals. The interesting point then is that, although both the motive to succeed and the motive to avoid failure may manifest through the *same* achievement goal, they may provoke a *different* proximal motive, that is, they may relate to a different regulatory basis. This is precisely what the data by Michou et al. (2012) data revealed. Whereas both the motive to succeed and to avoid failure related to normative-approach goals, the motive to succeed predicted autonomous regulation, whereas the motive to avoid failure predicted controlled regulation of normative-approach goals. Taken together across two studies, one in the sport and one in the academic domain, and across three types of assessed achievement goals (i.e., task-approach, normative-approach, and normative-avoidance), the motive to succeed and the motive to avoid failure were found to systematically relate to, an autonomous and a controlled regulation of achievement goals, respectively. Moreover, these proximal motives played an important mediating role in the relation between these two distal motives and a host of different outcomes. Finally, the proximal motives underlying achievement goals played a more pronounced mediating role than the strength of endorsing achievement goals. Clearly then, the data supported the theoretical claim for an enrichment of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation.

Individuals high in fear of failure not only endorse different achievement goals compared to those high in the motive to succeed, they also regulate their goal strivings differently. People high in fear of failure tend to regulate their achievement goals in a more pressuring way, presumably because their anxiety about failure leads them to pay attention to the controlling and coercive aspect of the achievement standards they are pursuing. In contrast, individuals high in the motive to succeed seem to focus more on the informational
value of achievement standards, seeing them as a challenge and a springboard for growth rather than evaluation. Of course, this research program is still in its early phase and many issues still remain to be sorted out. We sketch a few important lines of research in the next section.

**Future Research Directions**

**Future Direction 1: To What Extent Can the Current Findings be Generalized?**

Future research would do well to examine the extent to which the effects of autonomous and controlled regulation of achievement goals can be generalized to different outcomes. Such work might be illuminating for many outcomes given that the relation between achievement goals themselves and outcomes has been found to be somewhat modest, suggesting there is room for other variables to account for incremental variance in the outcomes, such as the reasons underlying achievement goals. These reasons have been linked to a diversity of affective (e.g., test anxiety, well-being), cognitive (e.g., surface and deep level learning) and behavioral (e.g., cheating, antisocial behavior) outcomes. Yet, future research would do well to try replicate and extend this set of outcomes, for instance, by including relational measures at the personal (e.g., relational aggression, relationship quality) or group (e.g., collaborative learning, group cohesion, group conflict) level. Based on SDT, one would predict a controlled regulation of achievement goals to go along with a more defensive mode of functioning (Hodgins & Knee, 2002) because people’s self-worth is then implicated in the goal-striving. Such ego-concerns may lead one to be more selective in sharing ideas, to be more critical vis-à-vis ideas deviating from one’s own perspective, or even to destabilize another person’s position in the group.

Another question is the extent to which the relations for motives underlying achievement goals hold up across different groups, different achievement domains, the prevailing achievement culture, and the broader cultural climate. The studies to date on
reasons underlying achievement goals have been limited to the domains of education and sports, raising the question of whether similar findings would emerge in other achievement settings (e.g., work). Further, the consideration of autonomous and controlled reasons may shed new light on the selective goal hypothesis (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001, 2003). Specifically, this hypothesis involves the idea that the effects of achievement goals depend on the type of goals that are salient in one’s social environment, with a match, relative to a mismatch, between one’s personal achievement goals and the contextually promoted achievement goal yielding superior outcomes. When this dynamic is applied to the regulation of achievement goals, it would seem that an autonomous regulation of achievement goals leads to positive outcomes in an autonomy-supportive environment, whereas a controlled regulation of achievement goals generates positive outcomes in a controlling environment. Although such findings may seem logical from a match-perspective (Higgins, 2005; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000), which is implied in the selective goal hypothesis, the SDT predictive would suggest that the twofold pressure coming from the controlled regulation of achievement goals as well as from the social environment yields a cost rather than a benefit. Although the presence of these two forms of pressure may lead to short-term persistence and achievement as long as only superficial memorization is required (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, 2005), it may also produce considerable “collateral damage”, including increased ill-being, poor social relationships (e.g., more relational aggression), and more unethical behavior (e.g., more cheating).

Similar reasoning applies at the cultural or national level. Because in some countries (e.g., China; Chao, 1994), citizens face greater expectations and are placed under greater pressures for achievement, it might be the norm to regulate achievement goals on the basis of controlled motives. This raises the question of whether the costs associated with a controlled regulation of achievement strivings would get cancelled out in such societies (see Lansford et
al., 2005 for an example in the parenting domain). According to the SDT-perspective, this is unlikely because a pressuring environment and a pressuring form of regulation both fail to satisfy people’s basic psychological need for autonomy, which is considered an essential nutrient for growth. To use a metaphor, the health costs of smoking are not cancelled if a teenager is growing up in a family where both parents are smoking, that is, a family where it is the norm to smoke. Although these claims await further testing, the study of the reasons underlying achievement goals in conjunction with the prevailing social ambiance provides new opportunities to test the selective goal hypothesis (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001).

**Future Direction 2: How Can Achievement Goals be Attained?**

A second issue that could be addressed in future research is whether contextual and personality factors predict both the “what” and “why” of goal pursuit over time? For example, would it be the case that individuals high in fear of failure display an increase in controlled regulation over time and that the pressure and stress that goes along with controlled regulation fuels concerns about failure over time, such that individuals high in fear of failure get stuck in a negative cycle? A more positive motivational dynamic is likely to characterize the functioning of individuals high in the need for achievement.

Further, research is needed on whether the valuation of achievement goals as well as the reasons underlying achievement goal uniquely relate to actual goal attainment. An additional possibility is that goal pursuit itself and the reasons underlying goal pursuit work in conjunction to produce goal attainment over time (see Elliot & Thrash’s 2001 concept of “goal complex”). For instance, individuals who strongly endorse outperforming others may achieve their normative ambitions, yet, this association might be much more pronounced when their goals are autonomously regulated. Past work within the achievement goal literature has shown that normative-approach and task-approach goals tend to relate to better achievement and deep level learning, respectively (Hulleman & Senko, 2010), which could be
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considered as proxies for their respective goal attainment. Yet, this work did not include assessments of reasons underlying achievement goals. Conversely, past research from the self-concordance model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), which is grounded in the SDT-perspective, has found that a relative autonomous regulation of personal goals relates to better attainment of these goals, but this body of work did not include measures of goal strength. Thus, in neither of these strands of work have the unique and interactive predictive power of achievement goals and underlying regulations been examined.

In addition to examining whether the “what” and “why” of goal pursuit independently relate to goal attainment, the route through which such goal attainment is achieved needs to be examined. This is an interesting topic as goal attainment might be achieved via a dual route: that is, stronger goal-endorsement may – due to its outcome focus (Freund, Henneke, & Mustafic, 2011; Freud, Henneke & Riediger, 2010) – lead one to invest more time, energy, and resources in the goal at hand, leading to better goal attainment. Yet, a process focus may also be conducive to goal attainment, which is more likely to occur under autonomous goal regulation. This is because what is central during autonomous goal regulation is not so much the issue of goal attainment itself, but the inherent satisfaction of pursuing the goal or the personal significance of the goal for oneself, which allows for a greater immersion in the activity at hand. Thus, when autonomously regulating achievement goals, goal attainment may rather follow as a byproduct of an approach towards goal striving. Controlled regulation of achievement goals, in contrast, may undermine a process-focus and instead make the outcome of goal attainment overly salient. In fact, when an outcome focus is paired with pressure to attain the goal, one may adopt an instrumental approach, both towards the activity at hand and towards others. That is, the learning activity would only be engaged in to attain the aspired goal, precluding full absorption in the activity and not allowing for a full competence development. Similarly, others would be approached primarily with the aim of
attaining the goal, leading one to use or even abuse others, causing damage to one’s social relationships. Future research needs to examine whether such controlled regulation yields the same or different effects depending on whether normative, self-referenced, or task-based standards are used as a reference point.

Put together, the “how” of goal pursuit may vary considerably depending on the extent to which one focuses on goal attainment itself, as well as the reasons underlying one’s achievement goals. This raises the question of whether the interactive combination of goal strength and autonomous regulation constitutes the best mix towards ultimate goal attainment. The combination of an outcome and process focus may be mutually reinforcing, as the outcome focus would lead one to invest time and prioritize achievement goal striving, while the process-focus would allow one to get fully engaged in the goal striving process itself once one starts to spend time on the achievement goal. People may be best off who can switch between focusing on the goal itself and bringing the autonomous motives underlying achievement goals to the foreground to optimize goal-immersion.

**Future Direction 3: Towards a Different “why”: Considering the Instrumentality of Achievement Goals**

The work on autonomous and controlled reasons underlying achievement goals primarily taps into people’s more dynamic reasons for pursuing achievement goals, that is, it reflects the extent to which people’s achievement goals emanate from themselves and are thus infused with a sense of volition versus coercion. Yet, these reasons could also be defined more broadly, that is, as the long-term reasons or purposes that one aims to attain through pursuing current achievement goals. In that respect, instrumentality models (e.g., Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Husman & Lens, 1999; Simons, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Lacante, 2004) could be used as a guiding framework to examine whether achievement goals are instrumental in reaching long-term goals, that is, in addressing the question of whether there exists a helpful
link between one’s current achievement goals and future higher-level goals in the person’s goal-system. Such a question fits well with systemic viewpoints on goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998) that address the “why” of achievement goals from a different angle.

From the perspective of SDT, not all long-term goals are created equal, as a qualitative distinction is made between intrinsic goals, such as community contribution, self-development, and affiliation, and extrinsic long-term goals, such as materialism, physical appeal, and popularity (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). That is, the same achievement goal could stand in the service of attaining qualitatively different long-term goals. Imagine a music student focused on mastering a piece of music (i.e., task-approach goal) to gain social recognition and admiration (extrinsic goal) or to stretch her skills (intrinsic goal). Intrinsic and extrinsic life goals concern broader life aspirations that guide functioning beyond achievement settings, but that nevertheless can lead one to adopt certain achievement goals within a particular achievement setting or situation. In fact, materialism and extrinsic goals, either as personally endorsed or as contextually induced, have been found to relate to normative-approach goals and test anxiety (Ku, Dittmar, & Banerjee, 2012), while intrinsic goals relate to task-approach goals and better performance (see Vansteenkiste, et al., 2006). While past research has examined whether life aspirations relate to the valuation of certain achievement goals, future research could address the corollary issue of whether achievement goals that are instrumental for attaining different life aspirations yield different outcomes. This would be a novel way to address the “why” of achievement goals.

**Conclusion**

Over the past three decades, an exponential number of scholars have made use of the achievement goal framework. We believe that the detachment of reasons from achievement aims per se opens exciting possibilities to advance the field. It provides researchers with the opportunity to more thoroughly address the regulation of achievement goals and to bring
different theoretical perspectives into the achievement goal literature. In particular, by considering the autonomous and controlled motives underlying achievement goals, the achievement goal literature could move from primarily focusing on competence-dynamics to paying greater attention to the dynamics of autonomy. This attempt to expand the theoretical basis of the achievement goal literature may not only be beneficial to the achievement goal approach, but to motivational science more broadly.
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Figure 1

*Graphical Representation of the 3x2 Model of Achievement Goals (Adapted from Elliot et al., 2011)*

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<th>VALENCE</th>
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**DEFINITION OF COMPETENCE**

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<td>Approach oriented</td>
<td>Autonomous Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to master the requirements of the task out of challenge, excitement, or personal significance</td>
<td>Autonomous Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to do better than before out of challenge, excitement, or personal significance</td>
<td>Autonomous Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to do better than others out of challenge, excitement, or personal significance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Controlled Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to master the requirements of the task out of internal pressure (e.g., guilt, ego-concerns) or external pressure (e.g., demanding expectations)</td>
<td>Controlled Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to do better than before out of internal pressure (e.g., guilt, ego-concerns) or external pressure (e.g., demanding expectations)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidance oriented</td>
<td>Autonomous Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to avoid not mastering the requirements of the task out of challenge, excitement, or personal significance</td>
<td>Autonomous Regulation&lt;br&gt;Attempting to avoid doing worse than before out of challenge, excitement, or personal significance</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Motives underlying Achievement Goals

Figure 3

*Graphical Presentation of the Proposed Model Combining the “What” and “Why” of Achievement Goals*

Type of promoted goal-structures

Style of promoting particular goal-structures

Competence-based motive dispositions

“What” of achievement goals

“Why” of achievement goals

Cognitive, affective, & behavioral outcomes