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OPINION

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Achieving a good impression: Reputation management and performance goals

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Abstract

Whether a student wants to improve their ability (i.e., has learning goals) or demonstrate it (i.e., has performance goals) plays an important role in their learning and motivation; students focused on the latter tend to avoid taking on challenges and seeking help when they need it. In the achievement literature, these different goals are thought to result primarily from holding different mindsets about whether one's ability is malleable or fixed. We argue, however, that this traditional framework has largely overlooked the powerful role that reputational concerns play in influencing which achievement goals students pursue. Specifically, reputational concerns may drive students to pursue performance goals and "prove" their ability to others, irrespective of their mindsets. We argue that closely investigating these concerns may help uncover new mechanisms by which performance goals are fostered and maintained as well as new strategies for developing interventions aimed at encouraging learning goals. Finally, we offer suggestions for how the achievement and reputation management literatures can be productively brought to bear on one another in future research.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Imagine two young students who have each failed a spelling test. The first student admits their struggle and elicits help from others to get better; the second student hides their failure and does not seek out help. Decades of research, largely influenced by achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), would construe these students' different concerns as representing different "achievement goals." Those like the first student have "learning" goals; they seek to achieve mastery by working hard, even in the face of difficulty. Those like the second student have "performance" goals; they seek to demonstrate their ability by selecting tasks at which they could easily succeed and avoiding tasks at which they could possibly struggle (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Meece et al., 2006). Given the clear benefits of learning goals for students' learning and persistence, it is critical to understand *why* students might have these different goals in the first place. According to the classic achievement goal theory, these goals primarily stem from different beliefs (or "mindsets") about ability. A belief that

ability can be "grown" with effort (i.e., a growth mindset) prompts one to view their performance as a reflection of their effort; this motivates a desire to put in more effort to improve (i.e., learning goals). In contrast, a belief that ability is "fixed" and stable over time, regardless of effort (i.e., a fixed mindset), prompts one to view their performance as diagnostic of their inherent ability; this drives concerns about proving one's ability to oneself (i.e., performance goals). Decades of research support the idea that these contrasting mindsets promote different achievement goals (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

While such beliefs about the nature of competence or ability are undoubtedly important in shaping students' achievement goals, they cannot entirely explain why students focus more on either their learning or their performance. Achievement goals develop and operate in *social* contexts, where students' behavior (and performance) is often public or could become public and can thus be evaluated by others (e.g., peers and instructors). As a result, students may pursue performance goals for reasons beyond proving to *themselves* that they are able; they might also be focused on proving their ability to *others*. That is, reputational concerns about how their peers and instructors are evaluating their competence might drive students to pursue performance goals, for example, by opting for easy tasks and avoiding challenging ones. Importantly, such reputational concerns could motivate performance-oriented behavior regardless of whether a student is concerned with proving their ability to themselves (i.e., whether they have a fixed or growth mindset). That is, even if a student has a growth mindset and believes that they can "grow" their ability by working hard, they still might avoid exerting obvious effort in public, as this could signal low ability to others.

Of course, researchers who study achievement goals have acknowledged that, in addition to mindsets, situational factors play an important role in shaping behavior in achievement settings (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Kinlaw & Kurtz-Costes, 2003; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Murphy & Dweck, 2010; Ryan et al., 2001). These researchers likely also recognize that reputational factors are lurking in the background and could contribute to performance goals; however, these factors have rarely been brought to the foreground of this research. Here, we outline how these reputational concerns can productively be brought to bear on current theorizing and research on children's achievement goals and behaviors. We will discuss how reputational concerns may serve as one mechanism through which certain inputs (e.g., praise for being "smart") motivate performance goals, as well as how they may hinder the efficacy of interventions designed to promote growth mindsets. Additionally, we will discuss how research on reputation management might benefit from insights gleaned from the achievement literature.

2 | WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT ACHIEVEMENT GOALS FROM CONSIDERING REPUTATION

Before exploring how reputational concerns may prompt performance goals, it is useful to review some of what is known about children's early reputational concerns. A wealth of literature has found that reputation management emerges quite early in development; preschoolers care about how they appear to others and manage others' impressions of their competence (for reviews, see Banerjee et al., 2020; Silver & Shaw, 2018). For instance, 5-year-olds who win a game when no one is watching opt to share their performance outcome with someone who previously saw them lose instead of someone who previously saw them win, seemingly in an effort to redeem their failure (Asaba & Gweon, 2019; see also Asaba & Gweon, 2018). There is also evidence that even preschoolers manage a reputation for being "smart": they were more likely to cheat when told they have a reputation for being a "smart kid," as compared to when they were told they have a reputation for being a "clean kid" or were given no reputation information (Zhao et al., 2018).

Given that children manage others' impressions of their competence by the preschool years and that such behaviors increase during elementary school (for a review, see Silver & Shaw, 2018), it is striking that there have been so few studies that have explicitly examined the link between children's achievement goals and their reputational concerns. Closely investigating these concerns may help uncover new mechanisms by which performance goals are maintained as well as new strategies for developing interventions aimed at encouraging learning goals.

2.1 | Reputation and praise

One important and ubiquitous input that shapes children's achievement goals is praise; it can communicate others' evaluation of a performance as well as *why* they think one succeeded. Notably, even young children are adept at extracting subtle messages from praise, using linguistic cues (e.g., trait labels, generic language) and other features of the context to draw inferences about what their evaluator thinks of them and their performance

(e.g., Cimpian et al., 2007; Corpus & Good, 2020; Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Gunderson et al., 2018). Different kinds of praise have been linked to different motivational and behavioral outcomes: those praised for their intelligence (i.e., "You are so smart!") tend to endorse performance goals and persist less in the face of failure, while those praised for their effort (i.e., "You worked so hard!") tend to endorse learning goals and persist *more* in the face of failure (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Under the classic achievement goal theory, these different forms of praise are influential because they shape children's own beliefs about whether abilities are fixed or malleable through effort (Cimpian et al., 2007; Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Zentall & Morris, 2010).

However, when children receive praise for being "smart," they may not only form beliefs about their own abilities, but they might also make inferences about what an evaluator values and how they can make a positive impression on this evaluator. This latter reputational concern makes concrete predictions that are not obvious under the traditional achievement goal theory. If different forms of praise influence children's motivation only through their mindsets, then it should not matter if children's achievement-relevant behaviors occur in public or private. However, if children's behavior is partly guided by reputational concerns, then children should be less likely to engage in behaviors that might indicate lower ability (e.g., taking on challenges, seeking help) when in public (vs. private). For example, if one found that a child gladly seeks help when they can do it privately, but not publicly, this would provide some support to the notion that reputational concerns are implicated in maintaining their performance goals. In a related vein, some of children's performance-oriented behavior following praise for being "smart" appears to be better aligned with fulfilling reputational concerns than with proving one's ability to oneself. For example, a performance-oriented behavior like lying about poor performance (e.g., Mueller & Dweck, 1998) does little to maintain children's beliefs about their own ability and is much more aligned with improving one's reputation by changing others' beliefs about the self.

When one thinks about performance-oriented behaviors as a means of proving oneself to others rather than to the self, one can focus on new important questions about the potential audience for these behaviors. Even for a child who themselves believes that ability is malleable, praise for being "smart" (or other forms of person-focused praise) might communicate that their *evaluator* highly values successful performance rather than effort or learning. From this, the child may infer that, in the presence of that evaluator, they need to hide their failures and appear to effortlessly succeed; indeed, even young children recognize that people seem smarter when they succeed without effort (Muradoglu & Cimpian, 2019). In private, however, they might continue to work hard and take on challenges. Based on the child's performance-oriented behavior in public, one might mistakenly assume that this child has a fixed mindset. A reputational lens thus emphasizes that, in many cases, it is incomplete to only ask whether or not someone pursues performance goals—one should also ask when, where, and with whom one pursues performance goals. Indeed, this focus on reputational concerns prompts interesting questions about how children generalize concerns about proving their ability across different evaluators. After being praised by a teacher for being "smart," do children learn that being smart is (or should be) important to themselves? Do they extend the inference that appearing smart is important to that specific person, to teachers in general, to adults in general, or everyone? Similarly, not all praise may be regarded as equally reputationally relevant; the extent to which children are motivated to manage their reputations may critically depend on who is delivering the praise and when. For example, when it comes to their reputational concerns about their ability, a child might care more deeply about a teacher's praise than a parent's praise, given that a teacher's specific role is to teach the child and evaluate their learning and performance. These and other crucial questions and predictions clearly follow once one focuses on these reputational concerns.

Importantly, we are not arguing that reputational concerns solely or entirely account for children's tendency toward performance-oriented behavior following praise for being smart. Different kinds of praise undoubtedly shape children's own motivational frameworks (including their mindsets) and these effects can be long lasting (Gunderson et al., 2013, 2018). Further, as predicted by the classic achievement goal theory, children engage in performance-oriented behaviors even in private after being praised for their ability, suggesting that certain types of praise may prompt concerns about proving one's ability to oneself (Henderlong Corpus et al., 2006). However, we propose that children are likely influenced deeply not just by their own mindsets about ability, but also by their concerns about what others think about their ability. Such reputational concerns could shape children's behavior independent of their mindsets (the two factors of course may also interact with one another). The achievement literature would benefit from focusing more on these concerns, as well as on possible individual differences in the extent to which children's behavior is guided by them.

2.2 | Reputation and growth mindset interventions

Reputational concerns may also influence the effect of another form of input, namely, interventions intended to promote learning-focused or "growth" mindsets. Such interventions emphasize that intelligence is malleable and that, with

effort, one can improve their performance. This messaging has successfully promoted growth mindsets as well as learning-oriented behavior (e.g., Andersen & Nielsen, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2007; Good et al., 2003; Yeager et al., 2019).

However, the efficacy of these interventions may be hindered by focusing only on individual beliefs without addressing reputational considerations. Even if growth mindset interventions successfully shift children to focus more on learning goals, students could simultaneously be worried about obtaining positive evaluations (and avoiding negative evaluations) of their ability from others. Even those with learning goals must pay attention to their performance outcomes, as these allow them to assess whether their effort was effective. In public settings, an awareness that these performance outcomes are being evaluated by peers and teachers could motivate performance-oriented behaviors. The motivation to appear smart to others may deter even a student with a growth mindset from seeking appropriate challenges or necessary help in the classroom, which could hinder their learning and potentially reinforce notions of ability as a fixed trait that must be "proven" or "demonstrated." Indeed, for children, there is not often a clear distinction between the learning process and assessment, as they might feel that they are constantly being assessed by others (e.g., a teacher) and thus need to perform well. These perceived reputational risks could act as significant barriers for students, who may be less likely to attempt difficult tasks that could cause them to lose face in the eyes of others.

Unfortunately, children's specific strategies for dealing with these reputational risks might reinforce their reputational concerns and further promote performance goals. For example, children sometimes engage in "self-handicapping," in which they downplay effort (e.g., saying to others, "I did not even study for the exam") in an attempt to manage others' impressions of their competence (for a review, see Urdan & Midgley, 2001; Leondari & Gonida, 2007; Schwinger et al., 2014). By downplaying one's effort, the student avoids negative evaluations if they perform poorly (since struggle can simply be attributed to their low effort) and attains positive evaluations if they succeed (since others will likely infer they succeeded due to having high ability). Over time, these behaviors could create environments where children form false beliefs about the efforts of their peers. A perception of one's peers as being effortlessly brilliant may exacerbate reputational concerns, even for children with growth mindsets, as it communicates that in order to obtain the reputation they want, they need to downplay their effort as well. In this way, children's attempts to manage perceived reputational risk in achievement contexts could undermine the intent of growth mindset interventions to promote hard work and mastery and could even hinder children's learning by further driving them to focus on performance rather than effort.

Given the ways in which the perceived reputational risk of pursuing learning goals can promote performance goals, even among children with growth mindsets, it is critical to consider how interventions might address these reputational concerns. A reputational perspective suggests that peer attitudes in particular may powerfully impact the success of mindset interventions. For instance, by late middle school, children recognize that working hard on academic pursuits will garner them approval from teachers but will make them seem less "cool" in the eyes of peers (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). However, peer norms need not always negatively impact learning. Yeager et al. (2019) found that growth mindset interventions were most effective at improving students' grades when peer norms were supportive of challenge-seeking. Indeed, capitalizing on the power of peer norms could lower the perceived reputational risk posed by putting in effort and seeking challenges. If one could make it "cool" to engage in these behaviors, then it might be possible for students to reap the benefits of learning goals while promoting a desired reputation. Our view suggests that, by removing and mitigating the reputational risk, one could greatly increase the effectiveness of interventions designed to promote a growth mindset.

Peer norms provide a promising avenue for encouraging children to enact a growth mindset; however, this reputational view also suggests that care must be taken to ensure that children do not simply learn to *fake* effort rather than make effort. In contexts where hard work is praised or rewarded by one's teacher and/or peers, it is possible that children (particularly those who have fixed mindsets) might be motivated to work hard only to impress others and thus "perform" effort in an attempt to be perceived as a hard worker. This might be especially true if teachers operate with a "false" growth mindset and non-selectively praise effort, even when it does not lead to learning (Dweck, 2017). Such practices could inadvertently communicate low expectations for ability (Amemiya & Wang, 2018) and also convey to children that what matters is *appearing* to work hard, rather than actually working hard for the sake of mastery. These concerns could ultimately undermine the benefits of efforts to instill a growth mindset: appearing to do hard work does not lead to mastery or success—doing the hard work does. A reputational focus makes it clear that researchers interested in maximizing the efficacy of growth mindset interventions should explore whether there are contexts in which growth mindset messaging may promote behavior that appears to be motivated by learning goals, but is actually driven by performance goals.

3 | WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT REPUTATION FROM THE ACHIEVEMENT LITERATURE

Thus far, we have discussed how considering reputational concerns may add to our understanding of achievement goals; however, the literature on the development of reputation management could also benefit from insights from the achievement literature. While some recent work has begun to uncover children's developing concerns for appearing smart as well as their capacity to manage others' impressions of their ability (Asaba & Gweon, 2019; Shaw & Olson, 2015; Zhao et al., 2018, 2019), research on children's reputation management would benefit from further integration with the literature on children's motivation and behavior in achievement contexts.

The achievement literature provides insights into the strategies a child might adopt when they are concerned with gaining versus maintaining a positive impression with others. Specifically, this literature has found that students may sometimes select different strategies for pursuing their performance goals: performance-*approach* strategies, which emphasize taking on tasks that allow one to demonstrate that they have high ability, and performance-*avoid* strategies, which emphasize avoiding tasks that could reveal one's lack of ability (Cury et al., 2006; Day et al., 2003; Harackiewicz et al., 2002). Researchers interested in why children might select certain reputation management strategies over others should consider this approach/avoid distinction, as these orientations predict different kinds of behavior. That is, two children who have similarly strong concerns with reputation might behave very differently depending on whether they opt for an "approach" or "avoid" strategy. An "approach" strategy might entail taking on challenging tasks, even around peers, if one is confident they can succeed. In contrast, an "avoid" strategy might involve staying away from most or all difficult tasks, especially in public, as they pose a reputational risk. These "approach" and "avoid" strategies will likely shape the kinds of strategies children pursue in trying to manage their reputations, not only in trying to appear competent, but also in trying to appear moral, honest, cool, kind, and so forth.

The achievement literature also highlights the kinds of sophisticated inferences children make about their *relative* ability, or how their own ability compares to that of their peers. By the eighth grade, children are sensitive to the fact that praise and criticism can reveal information about an evaluator's perception of someone's ability relative to others (Meyer, 1992; Meyer et al., 1979). That is, children infer that a child given neutral feedback has higher ability than a child who was praised for achieving the same level of performance. Similarly, children infer that a child given neutral feedback has lower ability than a child who was criticized for achieving the same result (Meyer et al., 1979). As children pick up on these subtle cues, they might strive to attain feedback from others that makes them seem smart relative to their peers by strategically approaching or avoiding evaluators who tend to praise selectively (Asaba et al., 2018). Inferences about their ability relative to others may even shape children's reputation management earlier in development; as early as age 5, children infer that an individual who expends little effort to achieve a successful outcome is smarter than someone who works hard to achieve the same outcome (Muradoglu & Cimpian, 2019). Additionally, by this age, children cheat more often in a game after overhearing an experimenter say that a classmate is smart (Zhao et al., 2019). Such inferences and behaviors likely occur outside of achievement contexts and the reputation literature would benefit from thinking more about how children make such relative inferences in other domains they find to be important.

4 | CONCLUSION

We have argued that investigating the interplay of reputational and achievement goals will allow us to understand how reputational concerns shape achievement goals and provide us with a fuller, richer understanding of achievement and reputational cognition more broadly. People's beliefs and mindsets play an important role in shaping their motivation and behavior. However, people also care deeply about what others think of them, which means that sometimes they pursue what *looks* good, rather than what *makes them* good. Children's reputational concerns and impression management strategies have the potential to dramatically influence their academic outcomes, friendships, and overall goals in life. Reputation can be a very powerful tool for promoting hard work and achievement, but wielding it requires an understanding of what people's reputational concerns are, where they come from, and how they shape their behavior across development.

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Kayla Good: Conceptualization; visualization; writing-original draft; writing-review and editing. **Alex Shaw:** Conceptualization; writing-original draft; writing-review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

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