

**When Children Limit Their Own Learning:
The Relation Between Perceived Parent Achievement Goals and
Children's Use of Avoidance Behaviors**

Jeanne Friedel, Ludmila Hruda, & Carol Midgley

University of Michigan

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle WA, April 2001. Please address correspondence to Jeanne Friedel, 1406 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI 48109; email: jmnelson@umich.edu.

When Children Limit Their Own Learning: The Relation Between Perceived Parent Achievement Goals and Children's Use of Avoidance Behaviors

Avoidance Behaviors

- Avoidance behaviors include purposely withdrawing effort or "self-handicapping;" avoiding new tasks that seem difficult or challenging; and avoiding help on a task even when needed.
- One reason children engage in avoidance behaviors is to protect self-worth, which may be threatened by poor academic performance at a new or challenging task (Covington, 1992).
- Likewise, when children feel that a parent or teacher will judge them based on their potentially poor performance at a task, they may be more likely to "handicap" themselves by avoiding activities (such as studying or doing homework) that would allow them to succeed, so they have an excuse if they fail.
- Conversely, parents and teachers may discourage children from avoiding challenge, help, or from "self-handicapping" by emphasizing learning and recognizing improvement, rather than relative ability or performance.

Achievement Goals, Teacher-Parent-Child

- The achievement goals espoused by teachers and adopted by children have been linked to children's use of avoidance behaviors, but few researchers have considered the influence of the goals children perceive from parents.
 - *Mastery Goals* reflect an emphasis on learning, understanding, and developing ability.
 - *Performance Goals* reflect an emphasis on demonstrating ability, often relative to others, in order to be judged "able" to do a task.
- While mastery goals teachers and children espouse have been shown to be negatively related to avoidance behaviors, performance goals have been related to an increase in such behaviors (Midgley & Urdan, 2001; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, in press).
- Moving beyond the context of the classroom, the goals children perceive *at home* have received little attention. These goal perceptions may be related to children's willingness to take on challenging tasks (Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992; Smiley & Dweck, 1994), to seek or avoid help, or to handicap their ability to succeed.

Hypotheses:

- Children's perceptions of their parents' goals are related to their use of avoidance behaviors; specifically, perceiving that parents emphasize mastery will relate negatively to children's avoidance of help, avoidance of novel tasks, and self-handicapping, while perceiving an emphasis on performance will relate positively to such behaviors.
- The relation between perceived parent and teacher goals and children's avoidance behaviors will be mediated by the personal goals children adopt.

Participants

- Students in four Midwestern school districts (N=945) participated by completing a survey in the fall and again in the spring during their first year of middle school (seventh grade).
- 53% of participants are female; 33% are from ethnic minority backgrounds (note: 26% black, 4% Hispanic, 3% other; children labeled "minority" did not significantly differ with respect to perceived teacher goals, perceived parent goals, personal goals, or avoidance behaviors).

Measures

- Survey items assessed children's motivational goals, perceptions, and academic attitudes and behaviors in mathematics. Children responded to each item using a 5-point Likert-type response scale, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the item.
 - Factor analysis of the items assessing parent, teacher, and personal goals confirmed the independence of the six constructs. Measures were then constructed by averaging children's scores on the items in each construct.
1. Perceived Parent Mastery Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .68$, Mean = 3.66, SD = .73)
"My parents would like me to do challenging math problems, even if I make mistakes."
 2. Perceived Parent Performance Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .71$, Mean = 2.70, SD = .86)
"My parents would like me to show others that I am good at math."
 3. Perceived Teacher Mastery Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .74$, Mean = 3.79, SD = .77)
"My teacher wants us to understand our math work, not just memorize it."
 4. Perceived Teacher Performance Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .84$, Mean = 2.25, SD = 1.06)
"My teacher tells us how we compare in math to other students."
 5. Personal Mastery Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .86$, Mean = 4.33, SD = .77)
"It's important to me that I improve my math skills this year."
 6. Personal Performance Goals, Fall ($\alpha = .86$, Mean = 2.27, SD = 1.02)
"One of my goals in math is to show others that math is easy for me."
 7. Avoid Seeking Help, Spring ($\alpha = .87$, Mean = 2.22, SD = 1.02)
"I don't ask questions during math, even if I don't understand the lesson."
 8. Avoid Novelty, Spring ($\alpha = .86$, Mean = 2.85, SD = 1.05)
"I would choose math problems I knew I could do, rather than those I haven't done before."
 9. Self-Handicapping, Spring ($\alpha = .87$, Mean = 2.00, SD = .95)
"Some students put off doing their math work until the last minute. Then if they don't do well, they can say that is the reason. How true is this of you?"

Analytic Method

- We used a path-analytic model to assess the relations between perceived and personal achievement goals and children's use of avoidance behaviors. Each model accounted for children's gender and minority status.
- We used fall measures of perceived and personal goals to predict children's self-reports of avoiding novelty, avoiding help, and self-handicapping in the spring.
- Both direct and mediated effects of gender, minority status, perceived parent and teacher goal orientations were assessed for each outcome separately. The effects of children's personal goals were assumed to be direct in each model.

Results – Gender and Minority Status:

- Girls were less likely than boys to perceive that parents emphasize performance goals. In addition, girls were less likely to espouse personal performance goals. However, we found that girls were more likely to report avoiding help and avoiding novel tasks in math.
- Minority students were more likely to perceive that teachers emphasize mastery goals, and also more likely to espouse personal mastery goals than other students. In addition, these students were more likely to report self-handicapping.

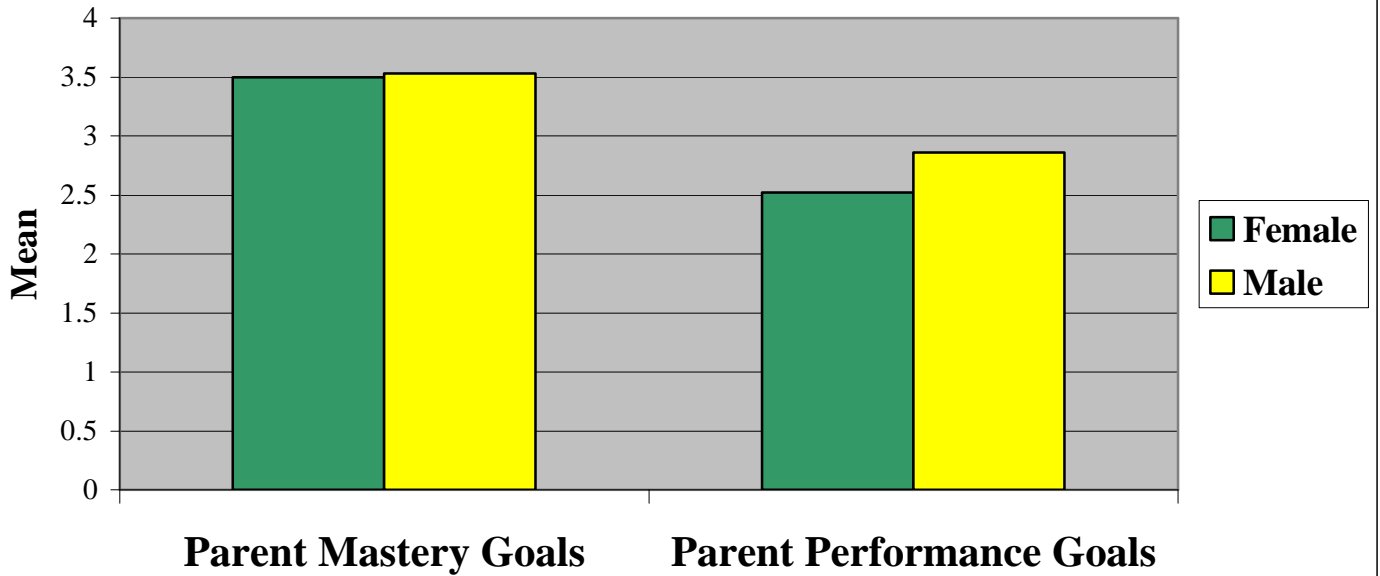
Results – Goals

- Children's personal goals were predicted more strongly by perceived parent goals than by perceived teacher goals.
- Children's perception of parents' emphasis on mastery was negatively related to their avoidance of novel or challenging tasks. Similarly, perceptions of parent mastery goals were negatively related to avoidance of help and self-handicapping, but as predicted, these relations were mediated by children's personal mastery goals.
- Personal performance goals mediated the relation between parent performance goals and self-handicapping; parent performance goals were related only indirectly to avoiding help; performance goals in general were unrelated to avoiding novelty.
- Personal goals did not mediate any of the relations between teacher goals and avoidance behaviors.

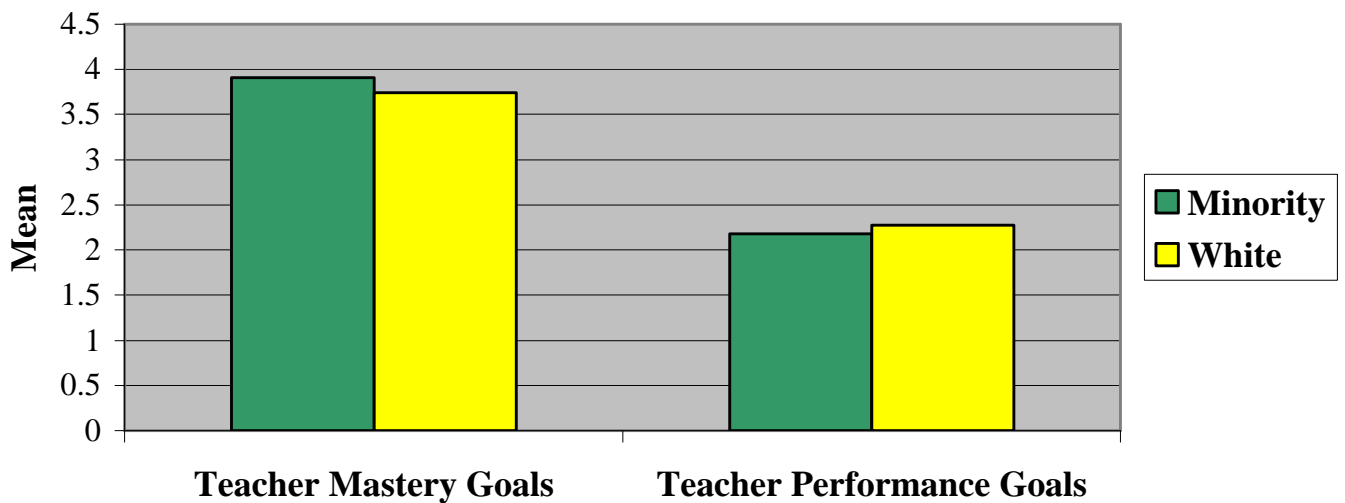
Discussion

- When children perceive an emphasis on mastery goals from parents, they are both more likely to adopt mastery goals themselves *and* less likely to engage in avoidance behaviors.
- Likewise, when children perceive that parents emphasize performance goals, they are more likely to adopt performance goals themselves; however, the connection between these goals and avoidance behaviors is less consistent. We found that while performance goals predicted increases in the likelihood of avoiding help and self-handicapping, they were unrelated to avoiding novelty.
- Future studies on the relations between parents' achievement goals and children's academic attitudes and behaviors should examine how parents communicate such goals to their children, as well as how the impact of such goals changes as students encounter new and different learning environments.

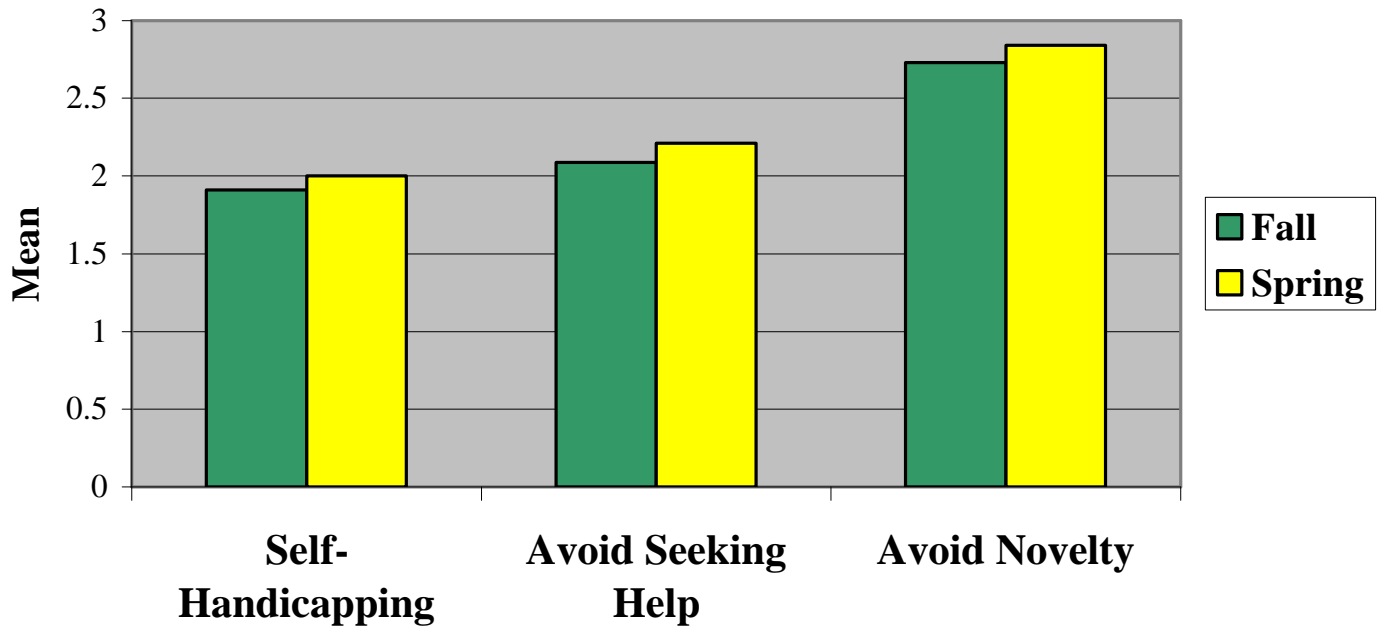
Girls' and Boys' Perceptions of Parent Achievement Goals



Children's Perceptions of Teachers' Achievement Goals by Minority Status



Changes in Students' Reports of Avoidance Behavior During Seventh Grade



Pearson Correlations

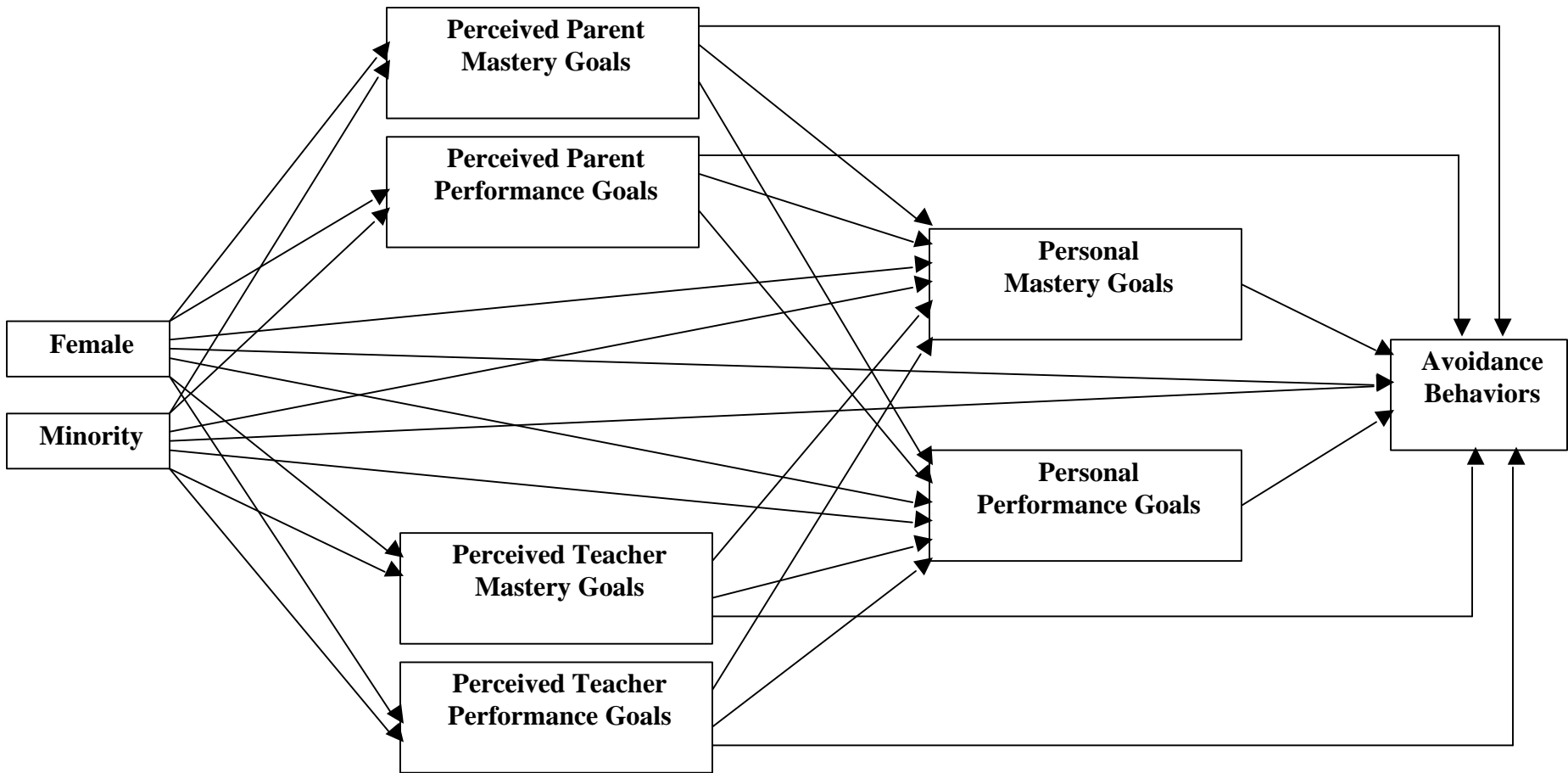
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Self-handicapping ^a										
2. Avoid Help-seeking ^a	.55**									
3. Avoid Novelty ^a	.42**	.56**								
4. Female	.02	.07	.06							
5. Black	.06	-.02	-.05	.08*						
6. Personal Task ^b	-.19**	-.26**	-.33**	.03	.11**					
7. Personal Perform ^b	.15**	.12**	.04	-.18**	.00	.11**				
8. Teacher Task ^b	-.11**	-.17**	-.19**	.01	.11**	.35**	.07			
9. Teacher Perform ^b	.20**	.18**	.12**	-.07	-.04	-.11**	.20**	-.23**		
10. Parent Task ^b	-.11**	-.16**	-.23**	-.02	.01	.42**	.12**	.39**	-.02	
11. Parent Perform ^b	.12**	.07**	.03	-.20**	.05	.12**	.53**	.02	.26**	.19**

* $p \leq .01$; ** $p \leq .001$.

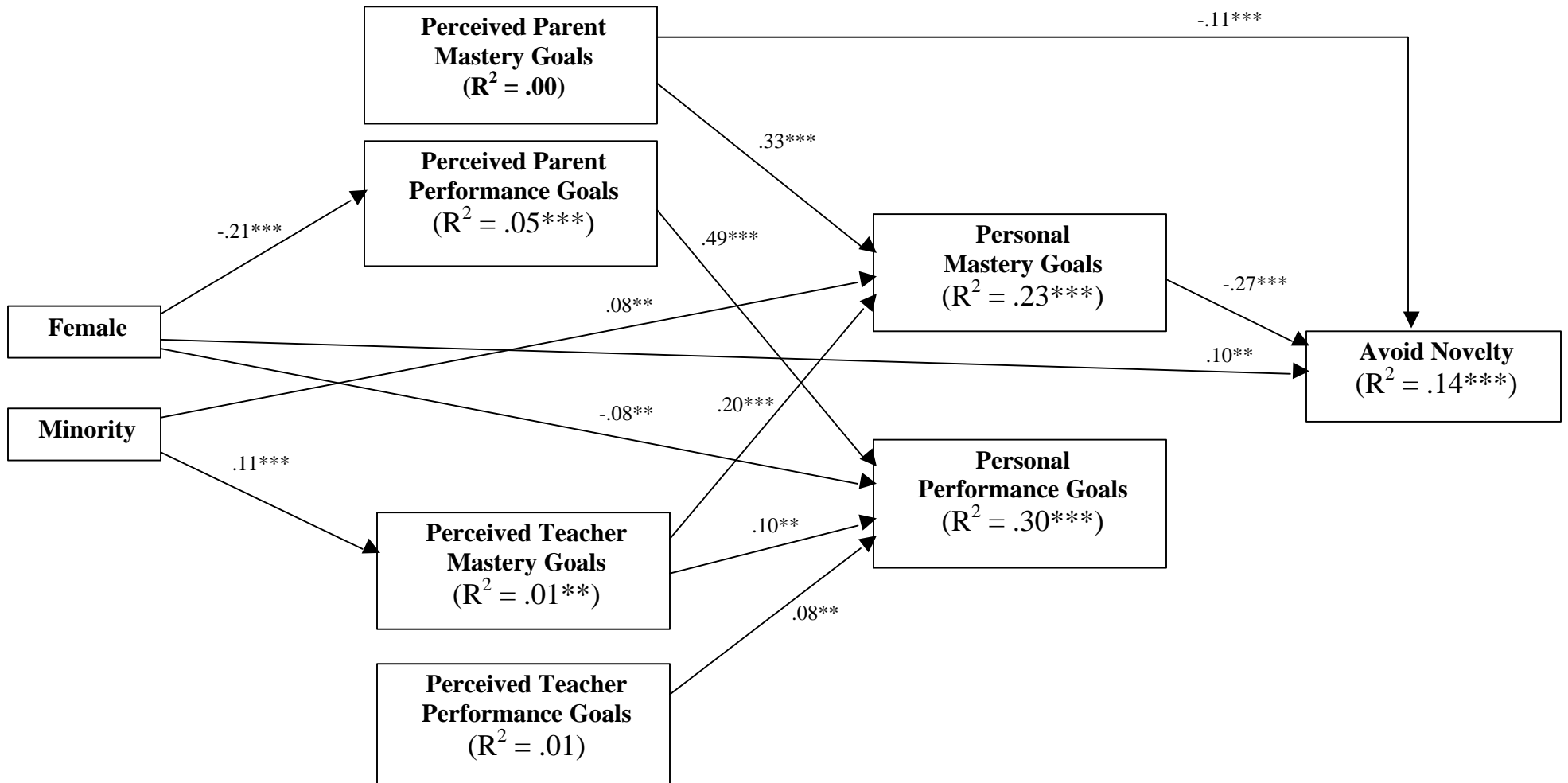
a. Spring measures (outcome variables)

b. Fall measures

Theoretical Model

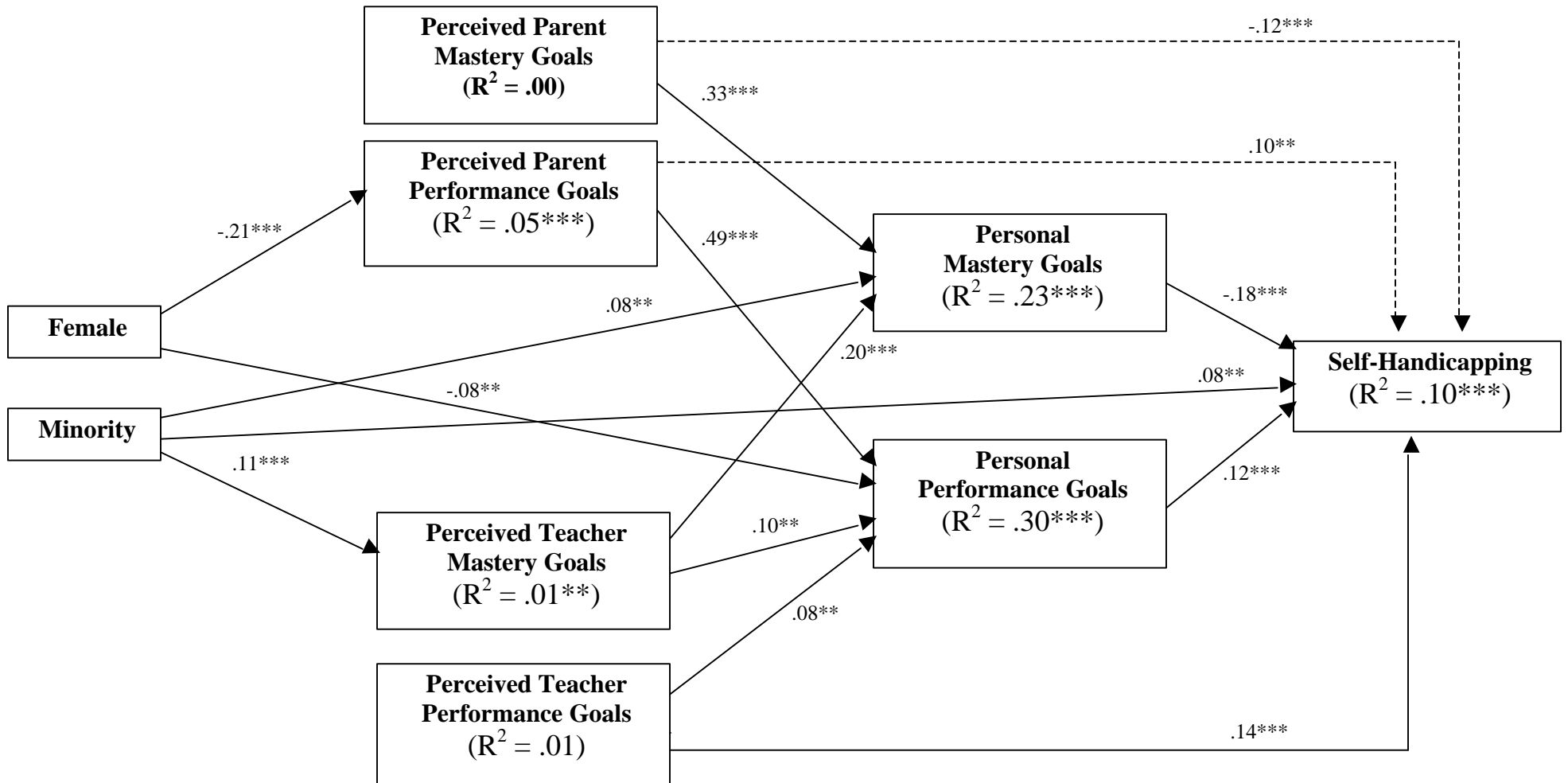


Avoid Novelty



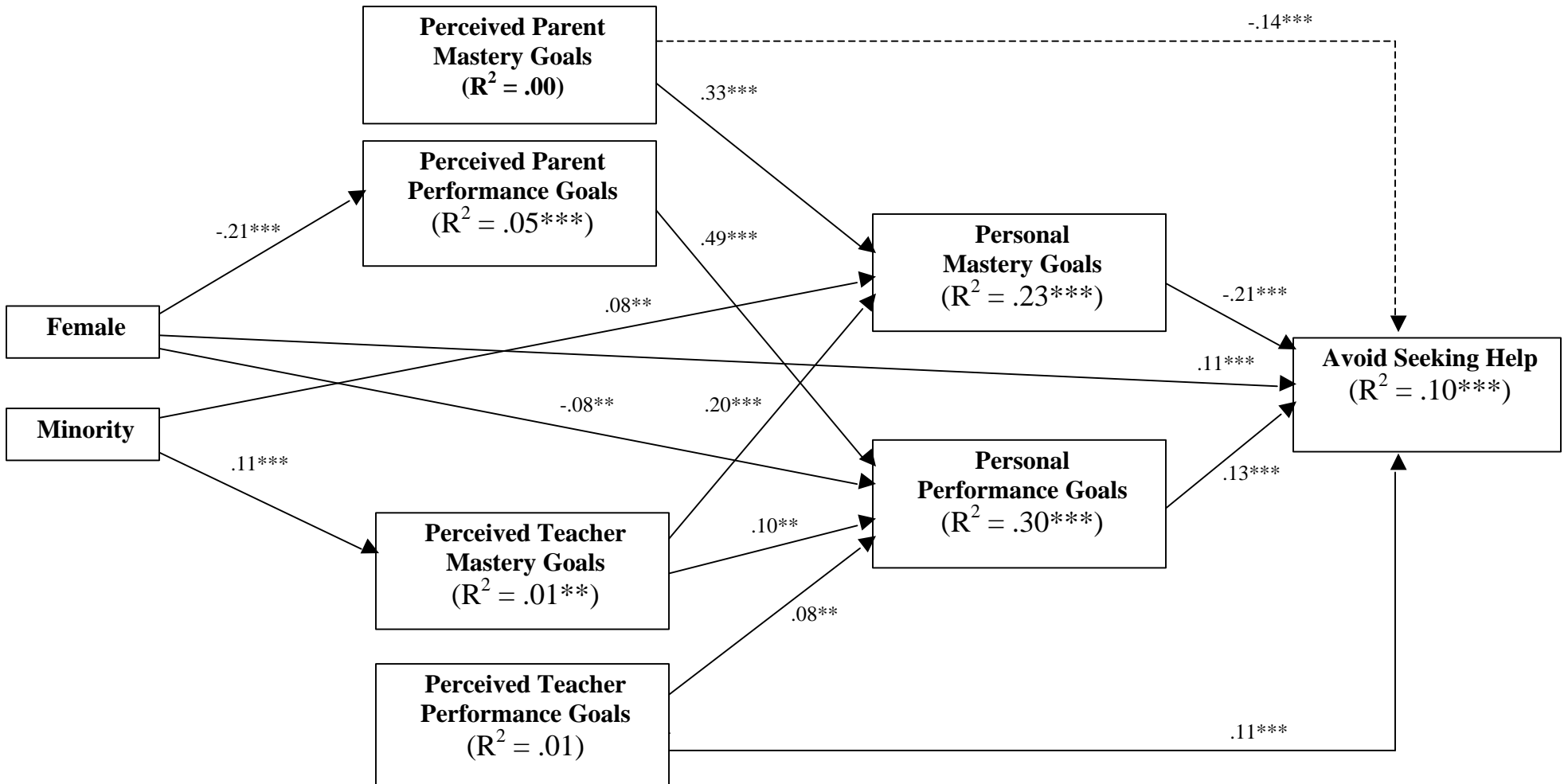
Direct Effect
 Mediated Effect

Self-Handicapping



Direct Effect
 Mediated Effect

Avoid Seeking Help



Direct Effect
 Mediated Effect

References

- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. Journal of Educational Psychology, *79*, 409-414.
- Ames, C., & Archer, J. (1987). Mothers' beliefs about the role of ability and effort in school learning. Journal of Educational Psychology, *79*, 409-414.
- Covington, M. V. (1992). Making the grade: A self-worth perspective on motivation and school reform. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. Psychological Review, *95*, 256-273.
- Elliot, A. J., & Church, M. A. (1997). A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. Journal of personality and social psychology, *72*, 218-232.
- Frome, P. M., & Eccles, J. S. (1998). Parents' influence on children's achievement-related perceptions. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *74*, 435-452.
- Heyman, G., & Dweck, C., & Cain, K. (1992). Young children's vulnerability to self-blame and helplessness: Relationship to beliefs about goodness. Child Development, *63*, 401-415.
- Kaplan, A., & Midgley, C. (in press). The relationship between perceptions of the classroom environment and early adolescents' affect in school: The role of coping strategies. Learning and Individual Differences.
- Maehr, M. L., & Midgley, C. (1991). Enhancing student motivation: A schoolwide approach. Educational Psychologist, *26*, 399-427.
- Midgley, C., Kaplan, A., Middleton, M., Urdan, T., Maehr, M. L., Hicks, L., Anderman, E., & Roeser, R. W. (1998). Development and validation of scales assessing students' achievement goal orientation. Contemporary Educational Psychology, *23*, 113-131.
- Midgley, C., Maehr, M. L., Hicks, L., Roeser, R., Urdan, T., Anderman, E., Kaplan, A.; Arunkumar, R., & Middleton, M. (1997). Manual for the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Midgley, C., & Urdan, T. (2001). Academic self-handicapping and achievement goals: A further examination. Contemporary Educational Psychology, *26*, 61-75.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1984). Achievement motivation: Conceptions of ability, subjective experience, task choice, and performance. Psychological Review, *91*, 328-346.
- Nolen, S. B. (1988). Reasons for studying: Motivational orientations and study strategies. Cognition and Instruction, *5*, 269-287.

Parsons, J. E., Adler, T. F., Kaczala, C. M. (1982). Socialization of achievement attitudes and beliefs: Parental influences. Child Development, *53*, 310-321.

Ryan, A. M., Pintrich, P. R., & Midgley, C. (in press). Avoiding seeking help in the classroom: Who and why? Educational Psychology Review.

Ryan, A. M., Gheen, M. H., & Midgley, C. (1998). Why do some students avoid asking for help? An examination of the interplay among students' academic efficacy, teachers' social-emotional role, and the classroom goal structure. Journal of Educational Psychology, *90*, 528-535.

Smiley, P. A., & Dweck, C. S. (1994). Individual differences in achievement goals among young children. Child Development, *65*, 1723-1743.

Stodolsky, S. S., & Grossman, P. L. (1995). The impact of subject matter on curricular activity: An analysis of five academic subjects. American Educational Research Journal, *32*, 227-249.

Urduan, T. (1997). Examining the relations among early adolescent students' goals and friends' orientation toward effort and achievement in school. Contemporary Educational Psychology, *22*, 165-191.