**Abstract**

This conceptual paper addresses the important yet overlooked distinction between *perceived* and *actual* peer achievement goals in educational settings. While research often conflates students' perceptions of others' goals with others' self-reported goals, we argue this obscures a dynamic perception-expression cycle. Drawing on social-cognitive frameworks, we propose a four-phase cyclical process: (1) *Interpretation* of peer behaviours through motivational filters (e.g., mastery vs. performance); (2) *Projection* of motivations onto peers via attributional heuristics; (3) *Adjustment* of personal goals to match perceived norms; and (4) *Expression* of modified goals, which peers then reciprocally perceive. This cycle explains why misperceptions (e.g., overestimating peers' performance approach goals) persist through social projection, confirmation bias and social reinforcement. For instance, students perceiving competitive norms may adopt avoidance strategies that inadvertently validate initial misperceptions, creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Importantly, the cycle operates bidirectionally: expressed goals become behavioural cues that reshape peer perceptions. Methodologically, we advocate multi-informant designs integrating self-reports, peer nominations and ratings, and behavioural traces to disentangle perceptual constructs from actual motivational patterns. Practically, interventions targeting *alignment* of perceived and actual goals could disrupt negative feedback loops (e.g., reducing achievement anxiety) while leveraging positive contagion (e.g., promoting mastery-oriented collaborations). By theorizing goal perception as socially embedded and cyclical, this framework aims to advance understanding the role of peers in students’ academic motivation and promote pathways to more adaptive classroom motivational dynamics.