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## Organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goals: the moderating role of psychological empowerment

Sut I Wong Humborstad  
BI Norwegian Business School

Anders Dysvik  
BI Norwegian Business School

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**Organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goals:**

**The moderating role of psychological empowerment**

(Accepted for publication in International Journal of Human Resource Management)

Sut I Wong

Department of Communication and Culture

BI Norwegian Business School

Nydalsveien 37, 0484 Oslo, Norway

Tel: +47-46410723

Fax: +47-46410701

Email: sut.i.w.humborstad@bi.no

Anders Dysvik

Department of Leadership and Organizational Behaviour

BI Norwegian Business School

Nydalsveien 37, 0484 Oslo, Norway

Tel: +47-46410713

Fax: +47-46410701

Email: anders.dysvik@bi.no

Mastery-avoidance (MAv) goals are recognized to be detrimental as they arouse counterproductive work-related behaviours. In the current literature, MAv goals are assumed to be more predominant among newcomers and longer tenured employees. The alleged relationship provides important implications but yet has received scant empirical attention. In response, this study examines the proposed U-shaped curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAv goal orientation. In addition, the potential moderating role of psychological empowerment on this curvilinear relationship is investigated. Based on data from 655 certified accountants, the results support the existence of the hypothesized curvilinear relationship. Also, it revealed that for employees who experience higher levels of psychological empowerment, the U-shaped relationship between organizational tenure and MAv goal orientation becomes flattened. Implications and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Achievement goal theory, mastery-avoidance goals, psychological empowerment, organizational tenure, curvilinear relationships

## **Introduction**

Achievement goal theory (AGT), formally defined as the type of mindsets that individuals hold when engaging in achievement-related behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), has developed into a prominent theory for explaining individuals' achievement-related behavior. A large body of research has provided evidence of the important link between different individual achievement goal orientations and key outcome variables, such as work performance (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007; Van Yperen, Elliot, & Anseel, 2009), feedback-seeking behavior (Porter, Webb, & Gogus, 2010; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), and helping behavior (Chiaburu, Marinova, & Lim, 2007).

Contemporary achievement goal research has developed and validated a 2x2 framework (Baranik et al., 2010; Elliot, 2005; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen, 2006). This framework consists of four individual achievement goal orientations—namely, mastery approach<sup>i</sup> (MAp), mastery avoidance (MAv), performance approach (PAp), and performance avoidance (PAv) (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). AGT distinguishes between mastery goals that represent mind-sets in which employees are concerned with developing their competence or mastering a task and performance goals that represent mind-sets in which employees are concerned with demonstrating their competence relative to that of others (Elliot, 2005). A second distinction is whether employees are directed toward the possibility of obtaining competence (approach) or away from the negative possibility of incompetence (avoidance) (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996).

The recent inclusion of the MAv achievement goal construct provides more comprehensive insight into which achievement goals lead to the best combination of outcome variables (Baranik et al., 2010). Previous research shows that MAv goals are more detrimental for

individual- and work-related outcomes than M<sub>Av</sub> and P<sub>Av</sub> goals, as M<sub>Av</sub> goals are positively associated with cognitive anxiety and negative affect (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Sideridis, 2008) and negatively associated with help-seeking and performance (Baranik et al., 2010).

According to AGT, M<sub>Av</sub> goals should be more salient among the newly employed and those in the latter stage of their career (Elliot, 2005). In other words, the relationship between the individual adaptation of M<sub>Av</sub> goals and organizational tenure may not be linear, but U-shaped curvilinear. To date, however, this proposition has received scant empirical attention (Baranik et al., 2010; Hulleman, Schrage, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). In response to this gap, in the present study, we contribute to AGT's findings by investigating the proposed curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and M<sub>Av</sub> goals. Our second contribution is to investigate the potential moderating role of psychological empowerment on the aforementioned relationship. If a curvilinear relationship between tenure and M<sub>Av</sub> goals is observed, a compelling question is whether managers and organizations can buffer the salience of M<sub>Av</sub> goals. Previous research on psychological empowerment (PE), which refers to four psychological cognitions of individuals reflecting an active orientation to their work roles (Spreitzer, 1995), supports that higher levels of PE are associated with positive work behaviors, regardless of employee tenure (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2009). Because individuals with greater senses of PE are more likely to perceive lower levels of stress and job burnout than individuals with lower levels of PE (Humborstad, 2010), they should be more likely to engender feelings of being able to shape their work roles and contexts (Spreitzer, 1995). Consequently, the salience of M<sub>Av</sub> goals among the newly employed or those in the latter stage of their career could be dampened under the condition of high PE levels. Accordingly, our second contribution is to investigate whether individual PE would function as a buffer to flatten the proposed curvilinear relationship between

MAv and organizational tenure. By doing so, we will contribute to the AGT theory by increasing our knowledge of whether, and/or under which conditions, MAv goals can be attenuated.

### **Organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goal orientation**

Individuals with MAv goals focus on avoiding task-related incompetence and use a task-based or self-based referent to gauge their competence (Baranik et al., 2010). In other words, incompetence is the focal point of regulatory attention in MAv goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). MAv goals entail “striving to avoid losing one’s skills and abilities, forgetting what one has learned, misunderstanding materials, or leaving a task incomplete” (Elliot & McGregor, 2001, p. 61), where competence is defined as the possessing the absolute requirements needed to accomplish a task, or one’s own pattern of attainment (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). MAv goals involve feelings of worry and apprehension, which include not meeting internal standards of competence and success (Sideridis, 2008). A recent meta-analysis study revealed that individuals with high MAv goals demonstrated a range of negative outcomes, including reduced help-seeking behavior and performance and increased negative affect, such as general anxiety, cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, sadness, fear, hostility, and guilt (Baranik, et al., 2010). Thus, it is theoretically and practically important to gain a greater understanding of specific situations in which MAv goals can be more profound and prominent, as well as whether they can be attenuated by managerial practices.

According to AGT, MAv goals are more common in certain instances and for particular types of individuals (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Elliot, 2005). In the domain of work, it is argued that the focus on avoiding incompetence may be more salient for those who are newly hired and longer-tenured (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Accordingly, we should expect that the relationship

between MAV goals and tenure is curvilinear and with a U-shaped pattern. First, with respect to new hires, the focus on avoiding self-referent incompetence is more salient for those who are new in the organization because they tend to focus on managing the basics of their job and are afraid of making mistakes (Baranik et al., 2010; H. S. Becker & Strauss, 1956). Organizational socialization theory suggests that newcomers are apt to have and perceive less control than employees with more experience (Avery et al., 2011). Newcomers often experience “reality shock” upon entering unfamiliar organizational settings (Louis, 1980, p. 230). Instead of gradual exposure or confronting situations at work a little at a time, newcomers are inundated simultaneously with many uncertainties (Louis, 1980), resulting in less perceived control (Avery et al., 2011). Thus, newcomers often adopt the strategies of just managing the basics of the job to simply accomplish the bare minimum required to do the job correctly (Louis, 1980). Secondly, as for older employees, we also expect higher levels of MAV goals. This is so because the longer the period of time that an individual stays in an organization, the less remains of his or her initial excitement about meeting and/or mastering certain needs, desires, and skills, which eventually leads to a decrease in both commitment and performance of the individual at work (Wright & Bonett, 2002). The individual may have reached a career stage where he or she does not see and/or is less interested in future promotion (Kooij et al., 2008) and is, therefore, less motivated to accomplish specifically growth-related tasks (Stamov-Roßnagel & Biemann, 2012). Therefore, longer-tenured employees might perceive that they are not able to, nor are they committed to, master new skills and ideas; in turn, they focus on not performing worse than before and/or not stagnating (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Based on these arguments, it seems logical to conclude that newcomers should adopt higher level of MAV goals, as they are more anxious about making mistakes and have less of a

focus on mastering skills and/or demonstrating competence. We would expect that the level of MAV goals decrease among more experienced employees since they have overcome the shock of being hired and gradually acquired higher levels of task mastery (Ng & Feldman, 2010). In turn, this reduces the level of MAV goals. On the other hand, however, individuals with longer tenure are also anxious in making mistakes in the event that they might “lose face” or do not manage to keep up with changing working conditions and increasing work demands. Additionally, they may be less committed to mastering skills and/or demonstrating competence to further advance their career within their organizations as they are satisfied with what they have accomplished in the past. In support of this, analyses of the relationship between tenure and performance shows that it develops from a positive towards flattening as age increases (Ng & Feldman, 2010). In sum, then, we propose that the relationship between organizational tenure and the level of MAV goal orientation should be curvilinear and with a U-shaped pattern, since we expect higher levels of MAV goals among newcomers and those with longer tenure, but not for employees with moderate levels of tenure. Thus, it is posited that:

H1: The relationship between organizational tenure and mastery avoidance goal orientation will be curvilinear with a U-shaped pattern.

### **The moderating role of psychological empowerment**

Psychological empowerment refers to a set of psychological states that are necessary for individuals to feel a sense of control in relation to their work (Spreitzer, 2008). PE is considered to be a motivational construct manifested in cognitions, which reflect the employee’s active orientation to their work roles (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). Based on the

conceptual work by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990), four cognitions of psychological empowerment have been validated by Spreitzer (1995): meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact.

Meaning, as one of the cognitions for psychological empowerment, refers to the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards (Spreitzer, 1995). Meaning involves a fit between the requirements of one's work role and one's beliefs, values, and behaviors (Spreitzer, Janasz, & Quinn, 1999). The second cognition is competence, which represents a generalized sense of a person's ability to perform work activities with necessary skills (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). It is also known as self-efficacy (Spreitzer et al., 1999). Self-determination, the third cognition, refers to an individual's sense of autonomy in having choices in initiating and regulating actions (Spreitzer, 1995). Lastly, impact refers to the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). The feelings of empowerment reflect the individual's orientation to his or her work role (Spreitzer, 1995). Through the lens of empowerment, individuals consider that their work situations can be shaped by their actions and ability to access and mobilize the resources needed to work effectively (Kanter, 1983; Sarmiento, Laschinger, & Iwasiw, 2004). That is, the four cognitions of empowerment stimulate internal feelings of self-control and self-efficacy (Spreitzer, 1995). Even a perceived work situation imposes constraints on individuals, so empowered individuals themselves look for latent possibilities and, in return, reproduce and alter the structure of their work environment (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993; Kanter, 1983; Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2008).

Because the MAV goal construct represents individual self-regulated orientation, which is associated with worry, concern, or fear about possible negative outcomes (Hulleman et al., 2010),

this mental regulation could be attenuated when the individuals have a stronger sense of empowerment. This is because individuals who feel empowered do not see their work situation as a given, but, rather, as something that they are able to shape by their actions (Spreitzer, 1995). As such, even individuals who are more prone to hold higher levels of MAV according to AGT (i.e., newcomers or individuals with longer tenure), with a strong sense of psychological empowerment, might see their work as meaningful and related to their own goals and standards (Spreitzer, 1995). Also, they might have greater beliefs in their impact and capability to master new skills (Spreitzer, 1995). Finally, their sense of having choices in initiating and regulating actions would stimulate an individual sense of self-control (Spreitzer, 1995). In turn, their feelings of worry, concern, and fear about negative outcomes might be attenuated. Thus, it is posited that:

H2: Psychological empowerment moderates the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goal orientation, in the way that the U-shaped relationship between organizational tenure and mastery avoidance goal orientation will be flattened only for individuals with higher levels of psychological empowerment.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

The sample of this study consisted of 655 certified accountants in Norway. The data was collected through access to the member database of the Norwegian Association of Authorized Accountants (NARF) in Oslo, Norway. NARF is a member organization with the purpose of promoting and encouraging professional and technical interests and skills, as well as the

economic and social interests of its members, all of whom are certified accountants. This particular context is interesting for this study for two reasons. First, although the sample is certified accountants that have had external recognition (i.e., being certified as an accountant) of their competence in doing their job, it is still interesting to see whether these individuals will still adopt mastery-avoidance goal orientation as self-regulation towards task achievement. Second, considering that competence is the central element of how an individual adopts different goal orientations, this sample could make the findings of this study more relevant, since both factual competence (being certified as an accountant) as well as perceived competence (as one of the components of empowerment) are considered. The survey was distributed through a web-based survey to 2,194 potential respondents from NARF's database. The respondents were given three weeks to reply to the survey. During that time period, two reminders were emailed (one per week) to each participant, resulting in an increased response rate each time. As a result, 672 complete data sets were collected. After screening for outliers, 17 cases (approximately 2.5 percent) were removed. As a result, the final sample consisted of 655 respondents with a response rate of approximately 30 percent, which is an average response rate for web-based surveys (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000).

### ***Measures***

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). *Psychological empowerment* was measured using Spreitzer's (1995) multi-dimensional scale with 12 items and four subscales. The four subscales were the following: 1. Meaning (e.g., "The work I do is very important to me"); 2. Competence (e.g., "I am confident about my ability to do my job"); 3. Self-determination (e.g., "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job"); and 4. Impact (e.g., "My impact on what happens in my

department is large”). A relatively high-construct validity of the scale has been demonstrated in previous studies (Spreitzer, 1995; Zhang & Bartol, 2010; Seibert et al., 2009).

*Mastery Avoidance Goal Orientation* was measured by a six-item scale adopted from Baranik, Barron, and Finney (2007) (e.g., “I just try to avoid being incompetent at performing the skills and tasks necessary for my job”). The psychological empowerment and MAV goal scale were previously translated into Norwegian and used in prior studies (Dysvik, 2010).

*Organizational tenure* was measured by a seven-categorical code, ranging from 1 representing individuals with less than or equal to two years of tenure to 7, which represented individuals with more than 18 years of organizational tenure. Items are listed in Appendix 1.

*Control variables* included education, gender, and age. Recent studies stress the importance of taking into account the potential influence of demographic variables on motivational processes (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2000), particularly their influences on how individuals adapt certain goal orientations (Payne et al., 2007). Education, organizational tenure, and age were measured in specific categories, which is beneficial in order to protect respondent anonymity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), so that any potentially easily recognizable single values could not be traced back to respondents. Education was measured by five categories, ranging from one year of college education to more than five years of education, resulting in a master’s degree. Age is considered to be an important control variable, as it may be highly correlated with organizational tenure. Thus, to partial out its potential overlapping effects on individual MAV goal orientation, we also included its quadratic term in order to control the possible underlying curvilinear relationship with the MAV goal. The age of respondents was measured in five categories, ranging from 20–29 years of age to over 60 years of age. (The

official retirement age in Norway is 67 years for men and 65 years for women, as of 2010 (Statistics Norway, 2010)).

From the profiles of the 655 respondents, the sample was reasonably representative. There were more female (64%) than male (36%) respondents, which can be expected in the accounting industry. Most respondents were between the ages of 30 to 39 years old (31%) and between 40 to 49 years old (34%), while 21% were 50 to 59 years old, and 7% were both from 20 to 29 years old and from 60 or older. Those who had a two-year college education (41%), followed by those who had three years of college education (38%) dominated the sample, which was also expected for certified accountants. For organizational tenure, the distribution was more even, indicating a reasonable variation for the current study. Those who had less than or equal to two years of tenure were accounted for by 11% of respondents, while 28% had tenure from three to five years, which dominated the sample. Those with six to eight years, nine to 11 years, and 12 to 14 years tenure were represented by 12%, 17%, and 14% of the sample, respectively. Five percent of individuals included in the sample were those with 15 to 17 years of tenure, and 13% were those with more than 18 years of tenure.

### *Analytic procedure*

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). For the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goal orientation (H1), as well as the moderating hypothesis (H2), Aiken and West's (1991) and Cohen et al.'s (2003) approaches were used. First, we centered the variables used to create the curvilinear (quadratic) term and the interaction (product) terms by subtracting the mean of each variable. An assessment of potential multicollinearity of all independent variables was carried out

using variance inflation factor scores, and all values were far below 10 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Back, 1998). Also, to avoid potentially misleading the significance, as well as the directions, of the curvilinear and interaction term, the curvilinear term (i.e., tenure squared) and the interaction term (i.e., the product term of tenure and psychological empowerment, as well as the product term of tenure squared and psychological empowerment) were added to the linear model (which was the baseline model in which the MAV goal was regressed on tenure) one by one in each hierarchical step, as the polynomial regression equation depicts below. While  $X^2$  represents the curvilinear term of tenure, the product term ( $XZ$ ) represents the linear interaction by the moderator ( $Z$ ), psychological empowerment, assessing whether the simple slope regression curves of the MAV goal ( $Y$ ) on  $X$  would be parallel for all values of the moderator ( $Z$ ). On the other hand, the product term of  $X^2Z$  assesses whether the shape of the simple regressions of  $Y$  and  $X$  would be constant across values of  $Z$  (Cohen et al., 2003).

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \beta_2X^2 + \beta_3Z + \beta_4XZ + \beta_5X^2Z + e$$

When  $Y$  = dependent variable;  $X$  = independent variable;  $Z$  = moderating variable;  $e$  = random disturbance.

All measures in this study were self-reported, as it is impossible to collect other ratings on an individual's self-regulated orientation and his or her own psychological feelings of empowerment. Self-reports of tenure, age, education, and gender are verifiable and observable characteristics that do not readily lend respondents to response distortion, and, thus, common method variance is likely to be quite minimal (Barling, Kelloway, & Iverson, 2003; Zacharatos, Barling, & Iverson, 2005). Even though the potential common method biases were expected to be small or limited, some remedies have been carried out. First of all, the proposed model in this

study is rather complex, involving interaction and quadratic terms. Complicated specifications of regression models reduce the likelihood of common method biases (Chang, van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). It is considered that respondents are unlikely to be guided by a cognitive map that includes difficult-to-visualize interaction and non-linear effects (Chang, et al., 2010). A common method bias is, thus, less likely to be persuasive in such a complex model like that of this study.

Additionally, two elements are considered to be the main causes of common method variance. These two elements are the respondents' affective states and the tendency for participants to respond in a socially desirable manner (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Thus, three procedural remedies were used. The first remedy was to create a psychological separation by using a cover story to make it appear as though the measurement of the predictor variable was not connected with or related to the measurement of the criterion variable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, to reduce individual evaluation apprehension and, therefore, make the respondents less likely to edit their responses to be more socially desirable, the respondents' answers remained anonymous, and it was clearly stated that there were no right or wrong answers and that they should answer questions as honestly as possible (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, we used two different response formats (i.e., Likert scales for MAV goal and psychological empowerment and categorical scales for organizational tenure), which separated the measures by having respondents complete the measurement of the predictor variable under conditions that were different from the ones under which they completed the measurement of the criterion variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

## **Results**

An exploratory factor analysis was performed to validate the internal factor structure of the new constructs (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). Eighteen items derived from two multi-item constructs, including mastery-avoidance goal orientation and psychological empowerment, were examined. As a general rule, factor loadings that are higher than 0.4 or 0.5 are considered to be meaningful (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). For this study, a common cutoff factor loading of 0.5 was adapted as the criteria for item reduction (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). The 18 items loaded (with factor loadings ranging from 0.53 to 0.79) on their corresponding constructs demonstrated a satisfactory structure with two distinct factors. An assessment of potential multicollinearity of all independent variables was carried out using variance inflation factor scores, and all values were far below 10 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Back, 1998).

To ensure the internal consistency of the items measured, a reliability test was performed to examine the Cronbach's alpha values. As depicted in Table 1, the value of the Cronbach's alpha for psychological empowerment was 0.88 with all 12 items included. For a MAV goal construct, the alpha was 0.73 with all six items included. Reliability measures above 0.70 are deemed to be acceptable for research purposes (Nunnally, 1978). The results indicate that reasonable internal consistencies were established. All of the variables were centered for further hierarchical regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991).

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Insert TABLE 1 about here  
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For Hypothesis 1, we proposed that the relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goal is curvilinear and that the curve exists in a U-shaped pattern. By using the hierarchical

regression analysis procedure, in the first step, we entered the control variables (i.e., education, age, and gender). In the second step, tenure and its quadratic (squared) term were added. The results, as presented in Table 2, demonstrate that tenure has non-significant linear associations with MAV goals ( $\beta = 0.018$  with p value greater than 0.05 level). Moreover, its squared term has significant and positive associations with MAV goals ( $\beta = 0.106$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and a significant increase of the explained variation with a p-value of less than 0.05, indicating that there are significant curvilinear relationships between organizational tenure and MAV goals (Aiken & West, 1991). With the linear coefficient being non-significant and a significant and positive coefficient of its squared term, the results indicate that the curvilinear relationship forms a U-shaped pattern (Aiken & West, 1991). To further investigate the form of the hypothesized curvilinear relationships, we followed Aiken and West's (1991) procedure and plotted the graph, as depicted in Figure 1. As expected, the MAV goal is a U-shaped function of organizational tenure. Individuals with either a low or high level of organizational tenure tend to have higher levels of MAV goals. Thus, H1 is supported.

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Insert TABLE 2 about here

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Insert FIGURE 1 about here

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In Hypothesis 2, it is expected that psychological empowerment would negatively moderate the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals. To examine this hypothesis, we first added psychological empowerment and its interaction terms with tenure, as depicted in Model 4 of Table 2. The results demonstrate that the interaction term of tenure and psychological empowerment is positively related to MAV goals ( $\beta = 0.142$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), while the interaction term of tenure squared and psychological empowerment is negatively related to MAV goals ( $\beta = -0.111$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). These results indicate that the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals varies in form as a function of the value of psychological empowerment. In other words, the fact that the quadratic interaction term (i.e., tenure squared  $\times$  psychological empowerment) is related negatively to MAV goals implies that psychological empowerment would attenuate the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals. That is, the U-shaped relationship becomes flattened for individuals with higher psychological empowerment. To further inspect the moderating hypothesis, we plotted the graph as shown in Figure 2. As depicted, the organizational tenure-MAV goals relationship is more flat for individuals with high psychological empowerment. For individuals with low psychological empowerment, the U-shaped curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals remains. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is also supported.

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Insert FIGURE 2 about here  
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**Discussion**

In the present study, a U-shaped curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals (Hypothesis 1) was examined. The results provided strong support for the presence of this curvilinear relationship. The results also revealed that the linear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals is non-significant, which means that this relationship cannot be explained in a linear manner, but instead in a curvilinear pattern. This finding contributes to the MAV literature by providing empirical support for the theoretical argument that MAV goals are situational-specific in respect to their relationship with organizational tenure (Stevens & Gist, 1997). As such, according to the findings of this study, the cognitive pattern associated with MAV goal orientation derives from variations in the degree of organizational tenure in a U-shaped curvilinear manner. Although research on MAV goals is still nascent, some studies have already demonstrated their detrimental effects on employee outcomes (Baranik et al., 2010). Thus, future studies on this relationship are recommended.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is that psychological empowerment moderates this curvilinear relationship. For individuals with high psychological empowerment, the U-shaped relationship becomes flattened. This provides us with interesting theoretical and practical implications. In particular, the findings of this study help the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of under which conditions the development of MAV goals vary in specific settings. That is, by nurturing employee experiences of psychological empowerment, management may reduce new comers and longer tenured employees' potential fear of mastering new skills and competences. Previous research has demonstrated the negative consequences of individuals pursuing MAV goals, including decreased help-seeking behavior (Baranik et al., 2010); increased worry, anxiety, and disorganization (Elliot & McGregor, 2001); and decreased job performance (Baranik et al., 2010).

On a practical note, this study sheds light on the question of what management can do about it. First of all, given that new comers and longer tenured employees are more prone to mastery avoidance goals as revealed in the current study, management may pay more attention to those individuals when changes are introduced. In particular, management should ensure to provide additional support to newcomers and longer tenured employees so to reduce their potential feelings of not being able to approach their tasks. Moreover, management may encourage learning from mistakes among these two types of employees by admitting and reflecting upon their own mistakes. Leaders serve as role models to their followers (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Previous study demonstrates that such leader behaviors encourage learning in organizations (Owens & Hekman, 2012).

In addition, the findings of the current study encourage managers to critically examine individual psychological empowerment in employees. Psychological empowerment is strongly considered to be a consequence directed at individuals, resulting from social, structural, and task-specific interventions cascaded by management (Humborstad, 2010). The interventions could be empowering leadership style (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010), enriched job involvement and participation in decision-making processes (Locke, 1976), and better organizational structure in terms of accessing information, resources, and support (Kanter, 1977). These provide crucial managerial guidelines for how psychological empowerment can be fostered as a means to attenuate the potential persuasion of MAV goals.

Also, considering that the results revealed a strong correlation between organizational tenure and age, it is to the authors' surprise that while there is a strong curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals, the linear and curvilinear relationships between age as a control variable and MAV goals were not significant. This might imply that regardless of

the ages of individuals when they begin new employment or when they reach substantial tenure in their organizations, they tend to pursue MAV goals. This further strengthens the findings of this study.

### **Limitations and conclusions**

The results of our study must be interpreted in light of several limitations. First and foremost, the study was based on self-reported data. By using self-reported data, studies could suffer from common method biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, because this study measured individual mastery-avoidance goal orientation and psychological empowerment, the best source of data is actually likely to be the individuals themselves (Chan, 2009). To reduce the potential influence of biases, we carefully pursued some procedural remedies, which we mentioned in the methodology section. Secondly, due to the confidentiality issue, the researchers could not identify the respondents. As a result, the study was cross-sectional. Thus, the results of this study do not allow causality interpretations within the presented model. Future studies would benefit from conducting a longitudinal analysis in order to investigate whether the level of MAV goals reduces as a result of increased psychological empowerment. Last but not least, individuals from many accounting firms across Norway were included in our sample. This strengthens the external validity of the study when compared to research that focuses only on one single organization (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). However, future studies are recommended to generalize the findings of this study for other industries and/or countries.

To conclude, the present set of results clearly demonstrates the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and MAV goals, as well as the moderating role of psychological empowerment on this relationship. Given that previous research has provided limited attention on

the MAV goal construct, this study contributes to the understanding of its nature in terms of the situational-specific issues. Moreover, this study stresses the role of management in attenuating such goals to be pursued.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations among variables

Variables	Min	Max	Means	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
1.MAv goal	1	5	3.91	0.64	0.73					
2.PE	1	5	4.12	0.58	0.88	.20**				
3.Tenure	1	7	3.58	1.88	n.a.	.12**	.23**			
4.Education	1	5	2.52	0.85	n.a.	-.21**	-.05	-.31**		
5.Gender	1	2	1.64	0.48	n.a.	.06	-.09*	-.04	-.11**	
6.Age	1	5	2.90	1.03	n.a.	.10*	.14**	.40**	-.30**	-.12**

Note: N = 655.

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Table 2. Curvilinear relationship analysis between organizational tenure and mastery avoidance goal with psychological empowerment as a moderator

Mastery-avoidance goal orientation				
Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Step 1: Control variables				
Education	-.19***	-.17***	-.17***	-.17***
Gender	.05	.05	.07	.07
Age	.03	.00	-.01	.00
Age <sup>2</sup>	.06	.04	.058	.05
Step 2: Independent variables				
Tenure		.02	-.02	-.02
Tenure <sup>2</sup>		.11*	.11*	.10*
Step 3: The moderator				
Psychological empowerment (PE)			.20***	.28***
Step 4: Interaction terms				
Tenure x PE				.14**
Tenure <sup>2</sup> x PE				-.11*
R <sup>2</sup>	.048	.059	.095	.112
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.011*	.036***	.017**

Note: N = 655. Standardized regression coefficients are shown in each equation.

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

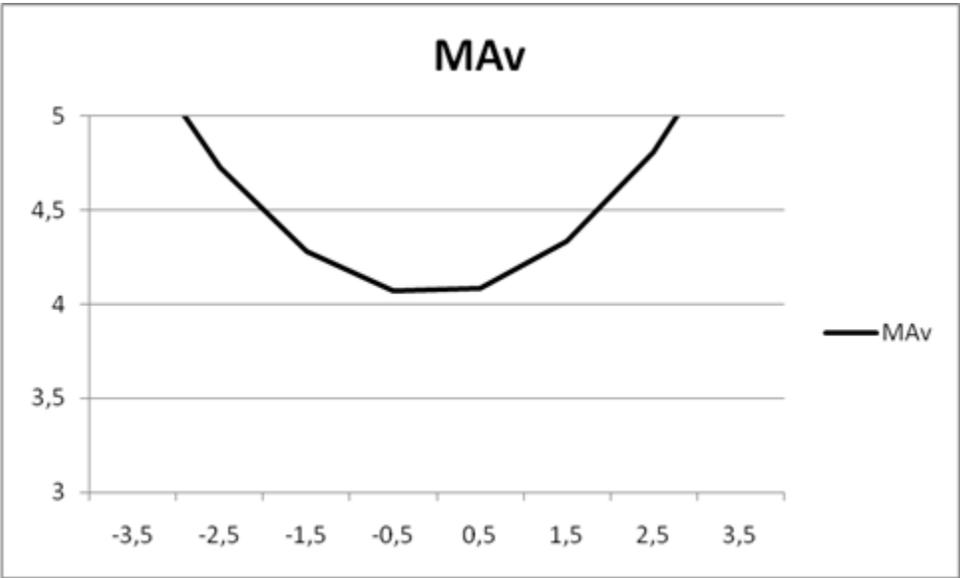


Figure 1. The curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goals

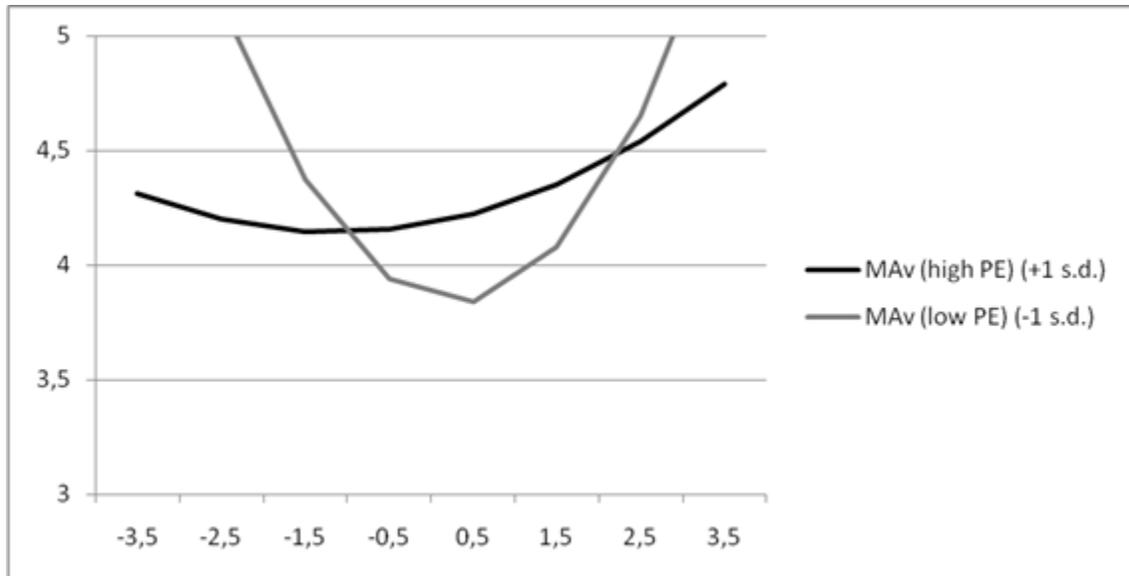


Figure 2. The moderation of psychological empowerment on the curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and mastery-avoidance goals

## Appendix 1. Measures

### **Mastery-Avoidance Goal Orientation** (Baranik, Barron, & Finney, 2007)

1. I just try to avoid being incompetent at performing the skills and tasks necessary for my job.
2. When I am engaged in a task at work, I find myself thinking a lot about what I need to do to not mess up.
3. At work, I focus on not doing worse than I have personally done in the past on my job.
4. My goal is to avoid being incompetent at performing the skills and tasks required for my job.
5. I just hope I am able to maintain enough skills so I am competent at my job.
6. At work, I am just trying to avoid performing the tasks required for my job poorly.

### **Psychological Empowerment** (Spreitzer, 1995)

#### *Meaning:*

1. The work I do is very important to me.
2. My work activities are personally meaningful to me.
3. The work I do is meaningful to me.

#### *Competence:*

4. I am confident about my ability to do my jobs.
5. I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.
6. I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.

#### *Self-determination:*

7. I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.
8. I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.
9. I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job.

#### *Impact:*

10. My impact on what happens in my department is large.
11. I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department.
12. I have significant influence over what happens in my department.

### **Organizational Tenure**

Please indicate the number of years that you have been working for the current employer.

1. Less than or equal to 2 years
2. 3 – 5 years
3. 6 – 8 years
4. 9 – 11 years
5. 12 – 14 years
6. 15 – 17 years
7. More than 18 years

## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> We use mastery goal and performance goal as labels in this article. In contrast, other researchers refer to mastery goals as “task” goals (Nicholls, 1984) or learning goals (Dweck, 1999). Additionally, performance goals are often referred to as “ego” goals (Nicholls, 1984).