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# The Role of Classroom Contexts in College Students' Learning Orientations

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# THE ROLE OF CLASSROOM CONTEXTS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS' LEARNING ORIENTATIONS

Educational psychologists have long paid attention to the achievement motivation and goal orientation of students in the university setting. Achievement motivation is generally viewed as cognitive, affective, and behavioral competence that can help students navigate via effective learning processes and enhance their academic experience (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Students can have a variety of AGOs. Some students, for example, desire good grades in school, while others think their learning experiences are as rewarding as what they learn. In the past, achievement motivation has been viewed as a cognitive base of behavior, and much evidence about the cognitive skills mediating the relationship between students' ability and achievement has been documented (e.g., Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986).

More recently, the formulation of the achievement goal orientation (AGO) has attempted to integrate both cognitive and affective components into aspects of students' learning processes summarized by the four types of goal characterizations, namely, the mastery-approach goal, mastery-avoidance goal, performance-approach goal, and performance-avoidance goal. In what ways students' AGOs influence, or are influenced by, learning environment? The field of educational psychology has actively incorporated the role of extra-individual processes described as the learning environment and classroom communities (e.g., Ames, 1992; Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001) into the recent investigation of student achievement.

Although the importance of such classroom-level factors as teacher/professor engagement has been shown to be related with desirable learning goals (i.e., mastery goals) for students to have (e.g., Church et al., 2001; Ames & Archer, 1988), relatively few investigations have been conducted in examining the relationship of AGOs with students' sense of

belongingness (SOB) in the classroom. Social contexts associated with classroom communities can be peripheral yet strong additions to students' learning experience. Students who find their classrooms to be supportive and caring and those who attached and committed to classrooms are likely to be engaging in optimal learning styles (e.g., Solomon et al., 1996). Accordingly, this poster investigates how different types and degrees of AGO are predictive of classroom contexts in the university settings.

## Methods

### Participants

There were a total of 1801 student responses, with 914 students being males and 881 being females. They were recruited from 92 introductory-level, Spanish classes. Each class had a maximum capacity of 25 students (i.e., 25 possible enrollments for each class), and the mode (17 classes) of the class size was 21 students per class. Of all the students, 35.5% were first-year students; 22.8% were sophomores; 25.2% were juniors; and 15.7% were senior students.

### Measures

Sense of Belongingness: Three items used in the present investigation were adapted from Chavis et al. (1986) and Rovai (2002): "I feel at home in this class" (Feel at Home); "I feel a spirit of community in this class" (Spirit of Community); and "I feel isolated in this class." (Feel Isolated) responded to by the 5-point Likert scale. These items were analyzed individually for their relations with AGO items.

Achievement Goal Orientation: Elliot and McGregor (2001) categorized the students' AGO into four mutually exclusive typologies, and a total of four items measured by the 5-point Likert scale assessing each aspect of AGO were included: 1) "I wish to completely master the material presented in this class" (mastery-approach goal); 2) "I worry that I may not learn all that

I possibly could in this class" (mastery-avoidance goal); 3) "It is important for me to do better than other students" (performance-approach goal); and 4) "I just want to avoid doing poorly in this class" (performance-avoidance goal).

Data Analyses

There were 1801 students who were nested within 92 classrooms. The nested data often discourages the use of commonly-available analytic procedures, such as the ordinary least square (OLS) regressions, because of the aggregation bias, misestimated standard errors, and heterogeneity of regression (e.g., Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Accordingly, the multilevel data analyses using the SAS Proc Mixed procedure were conducted.

## Results

Random-Effects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Model Analyses

Random-effects ANOVA model analyses were first conducted in order to estimate intraclass correlations (ICCs). A series of ICCs was calculated to be .07 ("Feel at Home"), .12 ("Spirit of Community"), .03 ("Feel Isolated"), suggesting that, respectively, 7%, 12%, and 3% of the total variance was accounted for by the classroom-level differences.

Multilevel Analyses

A total of four AGOs, along with Year in School, were included in the model. When the model with these predictors was considered, variance of the intercept and Year in School coefficients were statistically significant (*p*s < .01). Thus, these coefficients were treated as random in the following analyses. All predictors were grand-mean centered.

Results showed that there were positive relations of the mastery-approach goals with Feel at Home ( $\beta$ = 0.16; p < .01) and Spirit of Community ( $\beta$ = 0.08; p < .01), while there were negative relations of the mastery-avoidance goals with Feel at Home ( $\beta$ = -0.16; p < .01) and

Spirit of Community ( $\beta$ = -0.04 $p < .05$). Also, a positive relationship between the mastery-avoidance goal and Feel Isolated ( $\beta$ =0.11; $p < .01$) and that between the performance-approach goal and Feel at Home ( $\beta$ =0.11; $p < .01$) was found. Moreover, longer Year in School ( $\beta$ =0.09; $p < .01$) and being male students ( $\beta$ =0.19; $p < .01$) were positively associated with Feel Isolated, while being female students were positively associated with Feel at Home.

## Conclusions

This poster investigated different characteristics and degrees of AGO in predicting the levels of SOB in the university classrooms. The amount of SOB was found to be unequal across the classrooms, with the ICCs ranging from .03 to .12. Having explained a total of 12% of the total variance, most notably, Spirit of Community varied greatly across classrooms.

Multilevel analyses revealed that there were both positive and negative predictors responsible for the different levels of SOB. Specifically, students who engaged in the mastery-approach goal orientations showed higher attachment to the classrooms (i.e., Feel at Home and Sprit of Community), as did those who possessed higher levels of performance-approach goal orientations (i.e., Feel at Home). Regardless of the ways by which the achievement goals were defined (i.e., mastery- or performance-oriented), accordingly, higher levels of positive valence, or approach orientation, predicted higher levels of SOB. On the other hand, the mastery-avoidance orientations only resulted in showing undesirable patterns of relationship with SOB items (i.e., negatively with Feel at Home and Spirit of Community; positively with Feel Isolated).

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