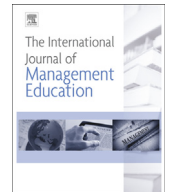




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## Research notes

# Beyond the Big Five: The mediating role of goal orientation in the relationship between core self-evaluations and academic performance



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the impact of core self-evaluations on academic performance. We also test several hypotheses that describe a potential mediating effect of three types of goal orientation on the above relationship. The model developed in this paper is statistically tested on a sample of 307 college students. The results indicate that students who perceive themselves as competent, capable and worthy of success (i.e. demonstrating positive core self-evaluations) achieve superior academic performance. Furthermore, the *avoid performance* type of goal orientation partially mediates the relationship between core self-evaluations and academic performance. *Prove performance* goal orientation is associated with better academic performance, but is not influenced by core self-evaluations. *Learning* goal orientation, which is characteristic of individuals exhibiting an intrinsic desire to improve their competence, does not have a significant impact on academic performance. The main contribution of this study lies in showing the positive impact of high core self-evaluations on academic performance and investigating the mechanism through which this relationship develops, namely the mediating effects of goal orientation.

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## 1. Introduction

Identification of personal and situational factors that affect students' academic performance is of considerable interest and importance to management educators. Recent research has focused on the dispositional traits of students as potential predictors of academic performance. Extant literature suggests that students' personality traits, as well as their approach to goals, particular motivational features, and factors related to learning strategies, styles and preferences influence their academic performance (e.g. Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). Specifically, researchers have found academic performance to be influenced in various degrees by the "Big Five" personality traits (Higgins, Peterson, Pihl & Lee, 2007;

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Nguyen, Allen, & Fraccastoro, 2005), efficacy expectancies (Bandura, 1997), different types of goal orientation (e.g. Elliot & Church, 1997; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002), and various related cognitive strategies (Pintrich, 2004; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990).

Despite the established linkages between a variety of personality traits, learning-related phenomena and academic performance, some of the conceptualizations of individual characteristics remain unexplored. For instance, the above-mentioned concept of efficacy expectations, found to have an impact on academic performance (Bandura, 1997), is considered to be an important component of *core self-evaluations* (CSEs) – a construct that reflects the “fundamental assessments that people make about their worthiness, competence, and capabilities” (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005, p. 257). Previous studies have found CSEs to impact outcomes such as job satisfaction, job performance, and general life satisfaction (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012; Judge, Van Vianen & De Pater, 2004; Judge et al., 2005; Piccolo, Judge, Takahashi, Watanabe, & Locke, 2005). However, although studies have considered particular separate aspects of CSEs and their effect on academic performance (e.g. Bandura, 1997; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2002), there is a gap in literature in terms of understanding the comprehensive aggregate impact of CSEs, i.e. how individuals assess their own capabilities and worthiness, on their subsequent academic performance.

Furthermore, recent meta-analytical approaches point to moderating effects that play a role in regulating academic performance. For example, Richardson et al. (2012) found moderators, such as extraversion, academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, and learning goal orientation to be significant in terms of their impact on academic performance. Whereas these findings shed important light on understanding the complexity of the relationships and the variety of factors that shape academic performance, the actual mechanisms and processes, often indicated by the presence of mediating variables, through which this outcome is affected by the judgments people make about themselves (i.e. CSEs) have not been widely explored. Since motivational factors and behavioral outcomes related to goal orientation depend largely on an individual's perceptions of self, and they have been shown to have an effect on academic performance (Harackiewicz et al., 2002; Richardson et al., 2012), it is plausible that different types of goal orientation may mediate the relationship between CSEs and academic performance. Considering the above reasons, this study aims to investigate the comprehensive effect of CSEs (as opposed to particular components of this construct)<sup>1</sup> on academic performance, as well as to test the potential mediating effect of various types of goal orientation (learning, prove performance, and avoid performance).

As previously mentioned, factors such as some of the Big Five personality traits have been shown in previous studies to impact academic performance (Higgins et al., 2007; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007). In order to complement this literature, this study is designed to investigate the potential additional effect that CSEs have on academic performance beyond that of the previously investigated and established factors. To this end, in our statistical analysis we account for the Big Five personality traits, as well as prior GPA, in addition to other commonly used controls. This approach allows us to alleviate some potential endogeneity concerns related to the omitted variable bias.

This paper is organized as follows: first, we discuss the main concepts used in this study, namely CSEs and three types of goal orientation: *learning goal orientation* – LGO; *prove performance goal orientation* – PPGO; and *avoid performance goal orientation* – APGO (Payne et al., 2007; VandeWalle, 1997). Secondly, we conduct a theoretical exploration of the linkages between CSEs and academic performance, as well as the mediating effects of LGO, PPGO, and APGO. Several hypotheses are formulated and a model is developed that illustrates the above relationships. This is followed by the description of our sample, the research methodology, and the statistical techniques used to test the hypothesized relationships. Finally, we discuss the results and the limitations of this study, provide some suggestions regarding future research, and analyze the theoretical and practical implications.

## 2. Theoretical background

In this section, we first review the concepts of CSEs, LGO, PPGO, and APGO, followed by a conceptual assessment of their relationships and impact on academic performance.

### 2.1. Core self-evaluations (CSEs)

The CSEs construct was conceptualized by Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997) and relates to individuals' self-assessments of worthiness, competence, and capability. The concept of CSEs is based on the idea that the appraisal process and outcomes that people engage in with regard to the outside world are not only influenced by the objects and their attributes and desires related to these objects, but also by the assumptions and opinions people have about themselves, others, as well as the world in general (Piccolo et al., 2005). Individuals with positive CSEs perceive themselves as “capable, worthy, and in control of their lives” (Judge et al., 2004, p. 327).

The CSEs construct is based on four core traits: self-esteem; generalized self-efficacy; emotional stability; and locus of control (Judge et al., 1997, 2005). Methodologically, however, in this study we utilize a uni-dimensional measurement approach to CSEs, as developed by Judge, Erez, Bono, and Thoresen (2003) who call for studies that consider CSEs as a single concept, as opposed to treating each of the four traits separately, due to the fact that in numerous studies the four core traits

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion regarding the aggregate conceptualization and measurement of the CSEs construct, see Judge et al., (2003).

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