



Academic entitlement: Its personality and general mental ability correlates, and academic consequences



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ABSTRACT

Academic entitlement, composed of entitled expectations and externalized responsibility, is thought to be an individual difference construct reflecting an expectation of academic success without need for taking personal responsibility by exerting the necessary effort required. This field study uses both cross-sectional and longitudinal data collected in a real classroom setting to test the degree to which general mental ability and personality traits predict academic entitlement. This study further tests the degree to which academic entitlement incrementally predicts final course grades in real college courses, net ability and personality. Results show that externalized responsibility predicts final course grades when considered alone, but does not do so when other predictors of academic success, such as personality traits and general mental ability, are considered. The results are discussed in light of the emerging literature on academic entitlement. Implications for higher education are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Academic entitlement is a topic of current interest and, at least anecdotally, most college professors have encountered entitled students in their courses. In addition to a growing interest in entitled attitudes in the media (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008), researchers in psychology and education have recently begun turning their attention to this topic by developing measures of academic entitlement (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). As a result, recent work has focused on understanding the predictors (e.g., Boswell, 2012; Turnipseed & Cohen, 2015) and outcomes (e.g. Anderson, Halberstadt, & Aitken, 2013; Greenberger et al., 2008) of academic entitlement.

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether individual differences in academic entitlement at the beginning of the semester is associated with learning and academic performance. We specifically explore whether academic entitlement contributes to students' final course grade on its own, and whether academic entitlement contributes to students' final course grades over and above other known antecedents of academic performance, namely general mental ability and personality. In doing so, we contribute to the growing literature on academic entitlement by expanding our understanding of its association with other important individual differences. Most importantly, we test the link between entitlement and what students often see as a primary

academic outcome: the final grade obtained in a course, a relationship that has yet to be demonstrated in research on academic entitlement.

2. Academic entitlement

Academic entitlement is a developed but stable individual difference characteristic defined as “the tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success” (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 982). Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt (2010) further define academic entitlement as students' beliefs of being “entitled to or deserving of certain goods and services to be provided by their institutions and professors that is outside of the students' actual performance or responsibilities inside the classroom” (p. 344). Students who display academic entitlement are characterized by beliefs that positive academic outcomes are deserved in spite of their actual academic performance, and that professors have obligations towards them that go beyond providing opportunities for learning and good instruction. Further, they feel little personal responsibility for their own academic achievement (c.f., Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2011).

Academic entitlement appears to have two empirically and conceptually distinguishable dimensions (Chowning & Campbell, 2009): externalized responsibility and entitled expectations. The externalized responsibility dimension reflects a “lack of personal responsibility” (p. 985). Students high on this dimension tend to manifest beliefs that the responsibility for their success in courses rests with others, and in particular, their course instructors. The entitled expectations dimension

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reflects inflated or unrealistic beliefs about grading strategies, or the relevance of course policies to oneself.

2.1. Academic entitlement and academic performance

Prior work has linked academic entitlement to a higher propensity of student uncivil behavior (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Kopp & Finney, 2013), a higher propensity to engage in academic dishonest behavior (Greenberger et al., 2008), and lower mental health (Barton & Hirsch, 2016). However, a key concern among researchers and teachers is whether and how individual differences in academic entitlement might be associated with actual learning in the classroom. To date, only a few studies bear empirical evidence on this question.

As indirect evidence of a potential effect of academic entitlement on students' experiences and learning in classroom contexts, Boswell (2012) found that academic entitlement is related to students' self-efficacy for a course, such that more entitled students report lower levels of self-efficacy. Because self-efficacy is itself known to be a positive correlate of course performance (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991), we surmise that both dimensions of academic entitlement are also likely to be related to course performance such that more entitled students will perform more poorly in a course.

Similarly, academic entitlement is related to less effective learning approaches, such as extrinsic motivation (Greenberger et al., 2008) and low mastery goal orientation (Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). Using their own measure of entitlement, Greenberger et al. (2008) also found a negative (though not significant) correlation between entitlement and self-reported GPA. Although this study assesses entitlement and GPA concurrently, it again suggests the possibility that those holding more entitled attitudes tend to earn lower grades.

To date, only one study using a general measure of psychological entitlement (Anderson et al., 2013) has reported a negative relationship between individual differences in entitlement and final exam grades in a field (classroom) setting. Yet, psychological entitlement is a construct demonstrably broader in scope than, and different from, academic entitlement (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008; Kopp et al., 2011). To our knowledge, no prior work has demonstrated an empirical link between students' academic entitlement as measured at the beginning of the semester and their knowledge of material in that course as demonstrated by their final course grades.

2.2. Academic entitlement and ability

When determining whether a new construct (here academic entitlement) predicts academic performance, it is important to first understand this construct's association with other known predictors of academic performance. One such predictor is general mental ability (GMA). GMA is a determinant of many indicators of students' performance in education settings. For example, meta-analyses have shown that GMA predicts outcomes such as first year GPA as well as cumulative GPA (e.g., Arneson, Sackett, & Beatty, 2011; Sackett, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper, & Waters, 2009; see also Hunt, 2011 for a review).

To our knowledge, no prior work has investigated the link between academic entitlement and general mental ability. However, some have posited that academic entitlement may be a self-protective mechanism that develops for students who struggle with the demands of higher education (Boswell, 2012; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008). As such, it is possible that academic entitlement is negatively related to GMA.

If we are to understand the influence of beginning of semester academic entitlement on end of semester course grades, it must be done in the context of GMA. To the extent they share common variance, it is important to establish the influence of academic entitlement on students' final course grades net the influence of GMA.

2.3. Academic entitlement and personality

In addition to GMA, it is also important to look at the influence of academic entitlement on final course grades vis-à-vis students' personality traits. Indeed, past work has linked personality to both academic entitlement and academic performance. For example, academic entitlement, especially the externalized responsibility dimension, may be negatively correlated with personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, but not openness to experience (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). Importantly, personality traits have also been shown to be predictors of college grades. In particular, conscientiousness is a predictor of student performance such that students who are more diligent, self-disciplined, and achievement striving tend to perform better in higher education (Noftle & Robins, 2007). Furthermore, openness to experience may also predict academic performance, such that students who enjoy critical thinking and new experiences perform better (Noftle & Robins, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand the influence of beginning of semester academic entitlement on end of semester course grades by looking at academic entitlement in the context of these personality traits.

2.4. The current study

The current study uses both cross-sectional and longitudinal data collected in a field study that took place in a real classroom setting to test (a) the degree to which GMA and personality traits predict individual differences in academic entitlement, (b) the degree to which academic entitlement predicts course grades in college courses and (c) the degree to which academic entitlement incrementally predicts final course grades net GMA and personality. Based on the evidence and theory outlined above, we advance the following hypotheses and a research question.

Hypothesis 1. GMA will be negatively associated with both dimensions of academic entitlement.

Hypothesis 2. Agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, and openness to experience will be negatively associated with both dimensions of academic entitlement.

Hypothesis 3. Both dimensions of academic entitlement will predict final course grades.

Research question 1: Will both dimensions of academic entitlement predict final course grades over and above the influence of known predictors of academic performance, namely students' personality and GMA?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and procedures

The current sample was obtained at an urban university in the southeastern United States. Students ($N = 204$) from four mid-level undergraduate psychology courses participated in this study. A majority (80.4%) were female, and the mean age was 22.82 ($SD = 5.36$). Participants self-reported being Caucasian (58.6%), 23.6% African-American, 7.4% Hispanic, 4.4% Asian-American, and other ethnicities (5.9%). One participant did not report this demographic information. Most students were either juniors (41.7%) or seniors (40.2%), and only 16.2% were sophomores, and 2% were freshmen. Two \$50 gift cards to Amazon.com were awarded via random drawing as a token of appreciation for participation.

Data were collected on two occasions. Data on academic entitlement, personality traits and GMA were collected on the first class day of each of the four courses. Final course grades, the dependent variable, were gathered from the instructors at the end of the semester after

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