



Brief report: Adolescent adjustment in affluent communities: The role of motivational climate and goal orientation



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A B S T R A C T

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Researchers now recognize that affluent youth experience tremendous achievement pressures, yet contributing factors or outcomes are rarely explored. Using a sample of affluent adolescents, the present study investigates the mediating role of goal orientation (GO) on relations between school motivational climate (MC) and adolescent adjustment. Adolescents from four high schools completed measures of MC (i.e., Performance and Mastery), GO (i.e., Ego and Task), and adjustment (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, and life satisfaction). Performance climates were associated with more adjustment problems while Mastery climates were associated with fewer adjustment problems. Adolescents with higher Ego orientation reported more depressive and anxiety symptoms, while adolescents with higher Task orientation indicated fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction. Adolescent Task orientation mediated the relations between Mastery climate and two adjustment outcomes (i.e., depressive symptoms and life satisfaction). Results suggest the importance of non-competitive achievement-oriented values and collaborative school contexts in adolescent adjustment.

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Studies suggest that adolescents in affluent communities experience tremendous achievement pressures (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Becker, 2002), yet the current literature lacks examination of contributing factors or their links to adjustment problems. Although the popular press has identified affluent youth as a struggling population, there is a paucity of empirical research to support this claim; the research community is just beginning to investigate developmental contexts unique to affluent youth. One potential influence that has been identified involves achievement-oriented values (i.e., upward mobility) typically found in affluent communities (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005b; Luthar & Sexton, 2004) and evident in schools where adolescents feel pressured (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). Drawing on existing literature on motivational climate (MC) and goal orientation (GO), this study seeks to better understand relations between MC, GO, and adjustment (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, life satisfaction) among adolescents from affluent communities.¹

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¹ Non-affluent adolescents may also be affected by GO and MC, however, the rationale for examining an affluent population is based on research suggesting that certain achievement-oriented values (e.g., upward mobility, prestige, success) are emphasized in affluent communities, thus leading to significant achievement pressures (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005a; Luthar & Sexton, 2004). The study of GO and MC are particularly relevant in this population given clinical accounts (see Levine, 2006) which suggest that affluent youth are highly competitive and rely on prestige, grades, and beating others to establish their sense of self. Furthermore, researchers suggest that, rather than comparing groups of people who differ in culture or social class, a specific group should be valued for its own sake and need not be compared to another group (Suzuki & Ponterotto, 2008).

Motivational climate (MC) involves a perception of how the environment evaluates one's achievement. Ames (1992) indicated that schools might endorse an MC that (1) underscores social comparison and competition (i.e., *Performance climate*) or (2) promotes learning and cooperation (i.e., *Mastery climate*) (see Table 1). Adolescents perceiving a Performance climate tend to report greater achievement pressures (Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000). Conversely, perceptions of a Mastery climate are positively associated with adaptive psychological states (e.g., purposeful) but negatively linked to maladaptive states (e.g., disengaged; Bortoli, Bertollo, & Robazza, 2009). Although the nature of the MC may be established by significant individuals within the school who endorse particular criteria for success (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009), adolescents' perceptions of their schools' MC are key in understanding their experience.

Similar to MC, goal orientation (GO) theory suggests that individuals hold achievement-related beliefs that determine how they define success (e.g., Dweck, 1984; Maehr, 1983). Nicholls (1984) defined two types of GO: (1) ability relative to others (i.e., *Ego orientation*) and (2) learning and improvement relative to individual capacity (i.e., *Task orientation*) (see Table 1). Ego orientation is associated with more performance anxiety, lower intrinsic motivation, and withdrawal in response to failure (Newton & Duda, 1993; Roberts, 2001, 2006; Roberts, Treasure, & Conroy, 2007). In contrast, Task orientation is linked to less performance anxiety, higher intrinsic motivation, and persistence when faced with setbacks (Ames, 1992; Duda, 1993; Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005; Kavussanu & Roberts, 1996).

Like self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), MC and GO theories focus on understanding the social-contextual conditions that facilitate or impede self-motivation and healthy development. Although it is clear that contextual surroundings impact adolescent adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), associations between MC and GO are less clear-cut (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989). Some studies indicate that GO changes based on the current MC (Smith et al., 2009), while others suggest that GOs develop into dispositional traits (Ames, 1992; Nicholls et al., 1989). The goal of this study is to test a mediational model (see Fig. 1) to clarify relations among perceptions of achievement-oriented values within the school environment (i.e., MC), achievement-oriented values (i.e., GO), and adjustment problems (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, life satisfaction) among adolescents from affluent communities.

Method

Participants

Participants included 10th graders ($N = 123$; M age = 15.54; 42% male; 84% Caucasian) from suburbs in the Northeast and Midwest. Schools were selected from townships with: (1) a median annual family income at or above \$100,000 and (2) at least 25% of adults with a graduate degree (see Luthar & Goldstein, 2008; Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006) according to census data provided by city-data.com. Eighty-five percent of parents reported earning more than \$100,000 per year² and 57% of parents reported that they had graduate degree.

Measures

Motivational climate

A modified version of the *Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire* (PMCSQ-2; Newton et al., 2000) was used to assess adolescents' perceptions of school MC. Although developed to assess MC in sports settings, this measure was modified to assess MC in an academic setting (i.e., "Players are 'psyched' when they do better than their teammates in a game" was changed to "Students are 'psyched' when they do better than their classmates on a test"). A 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true*, 5 = *very true*) was used. Both Performance and Mastery subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$ and $.85$, respectively).

Goal orientation

Adolescent GO was assessed using the *Task and Ego in Sport Questionnaire* (TEOSQ; Duda & Nicholls, 1992). Participants were asked to consider times they felt most successful in academics. Task-oriented (e.g., "I work really hard") and Ego-oriented (e.g., "I get the highest grades") items were indicated on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). Task and Ego subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$ and $.92$, respectively).

Adolescent adjustment

The *Achenbach Youth Self Report–Depression scale* (YSR-D; Clarke, Lewinsohn, Hops, & Seeley, 1992) and *Anxiety scale* (YSR-A³) from the 118-item YSR measure (Achenbach, 1991) were used to assess adolescent depression and anxiety. Participants indicated whether each statement was *not true* (0), *somewhat true* (1), or *very true* (2). Depression and anxiety subscales demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .85$ and $.91$, respectively).

² Mean levels of study constructs (i.e., GO, MC, adjustment) did not differ as a function of income.

³ Clarke et al. (1992) did not develop an anxiety scale of the Youth Self-Report, thus the same items composing the CBCL-A (Kendall et al., 2007) were used to construct the YSR-A for the current study.

Table 1

Comparing motivational climate (performance and mastery) with goal orientation (ego and task).

Corresponding motivational climate (MC) and goal orientation (GO) classifications	Description	Adjustment outcomes (as suggested by the literature)
School context performance MC Individual context ego GO	Winning, beating others, achievement, success, social comparison, interpersonal competition, superiority, mistakes are unacceptable	Negative
School context mastery MC Individual context task GO	Learning, improvement, understanding, skill advancement, self-improvement, exceeding personal records, effort, cooperation, mistakes are part of the learning process	Positive

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS) was used to assess life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Participants responded to 5-items (e.g. “In most ways, my life is close to ideal”) using a 1–7 scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). This measure also demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 2.⁴ Ego orientation and Performance climate scores were relatively low while Task orientation and Mastery climate scores were relatively high. Mean levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms were both low and life satisfaction was relatively high, suggesting that adolescents were generally well-adjusted.

Correlations among all study variables are presented in Table 3. Adolescents who perceived more of a Mastery climate also were more Task-oriented, and those who perceived more of a Performance climate were more Ego-oriented. Both Performance MC and Ego GO were positively related to depressive and anxiety symptoms. Only Performance MC was positively associated with life satisfaction. In contrast, both Mastery MC and Task GO were negatively linked to depressive symptoms and positively related to life satisfaction. Only Mastery MC was negatively associated with anxiety (for main effects see Table 4). Female participants reported significantly more anxiety, $t(122) = 2.37, p < .05$; however, no other gender differences were detected.

Mediation analyses

Six mediational models were tested to determine whether relations between MC and adjustment were mediated by GO. Bootstrapping analyses, including bias corrected (BC) confidence intervals (CI's, 95%), were used to test the models (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) using a bootstrapped sample of $n = 5000$. Two mediational models were significant (see Fig. 1). Results indicated that Mastery MC was indirectly related to adolescent depressive symptoms and life satisfaction through Task GO (BC lower = $-.13$, BC upper = $-.10$ and BC lower = $.01$, BC upper = $.15$, respectively). Findings demonstrate that adolescents who perceive that their school environment emphasizes personal progress/growth also define their own academic success as learning/improvement and report fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction.

Discussion

Results from the mediational models suggest that affluent adolescents who perceive their school climates to be more supportive and non-competitive tend to define personal success as learning and improvement (i.e., rather than beating others) and also experience fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction. Interestingly, however, adolescents who perceived that their school climates emphasized performance goals (i.e., superiority) were *not* themselves more focused on winning/beating others, nor did they report more depressive symptoms or less life satisfaction. Thus, the associations between MC, GO, and adjustment emerged only when *positive* aspects of school environment and individual achievement values were considered.

Several noteworthy limitations of this study deserve mention. First, adolescents reported on MC, GO, and adjustment, and results may therefore represent a reporter artifact. Second, data were cross-sectional which precludes determination of directionality. Third, the low levels of symptomatology reported suggest the possibility of self-selection effects (i.e., adolescents who agreed to participate may be better adjusted than those who declined), or underreporting effects, which may result from a concern about privacy (Sills & Song, 2002), a general distrust of electronic data collection methodology (Scriven & Smith-Ferrier, 2003), or uncontrolled responding environments (surveys administered at home; Stanton & Rogelberg, 2001). Finally, the absence of a comparison group (i.e., low- or middle-SES adolescents) renders us unable to draw conclusions regarding the generalizability of these findings to other populations. In addition to addressing these limitations, findings

⁴ Data were examined for “nested” data structures (e.g., children nested within schools) following steps outlined in Peugh (2010). Analyses indicated no significant between-school variability, suggesting that data from all four schools could be combined for the primary analyses.

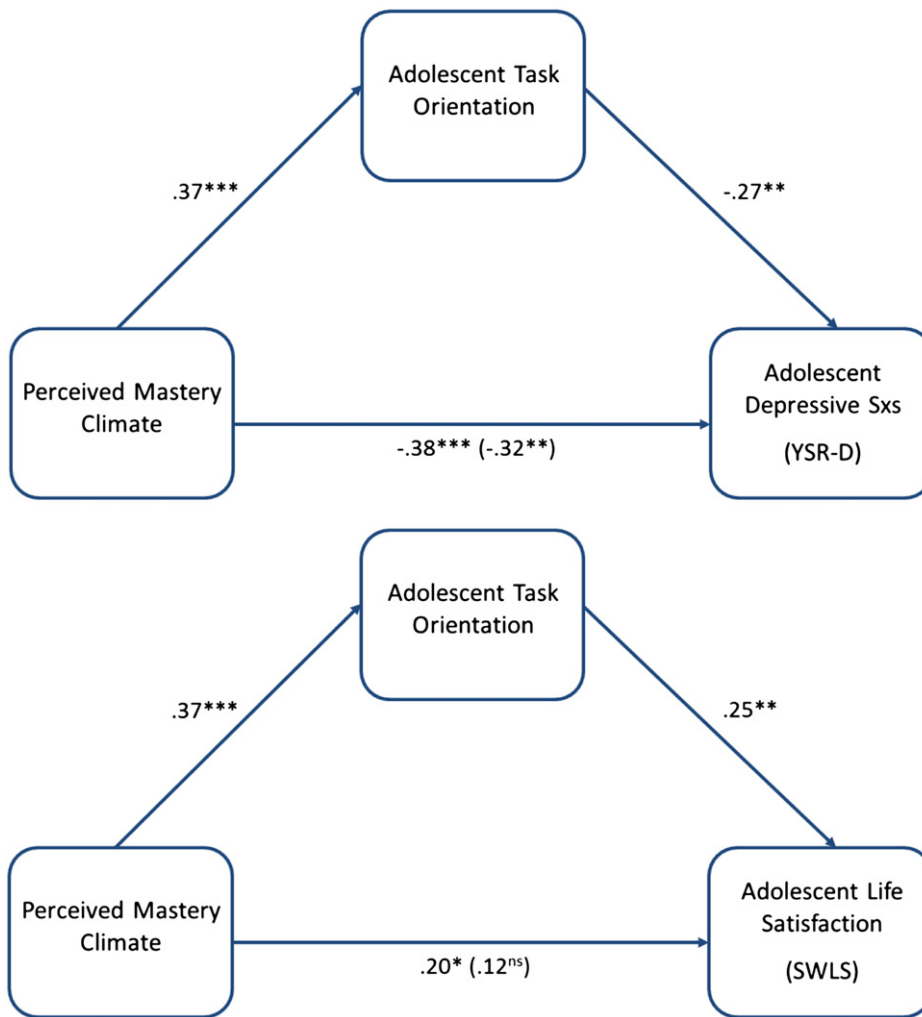


Fig. 1. Two significant mediational models. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

support taking a more nuanced approach when examining GO and MC in future work. The literature often conceptualizes individuals as *either* Ego/Performance-oriented or Task/Mastery-oriented, yet individuals do not always score high on one and low on the other. Utilizing a person-centered and/or continuous approach may better elucidate relations between these variables.

In sum, the present study builds upon our understanding of the pressures adolescents from affluent communities face by examining achievement-oriented values, including definitions of one’s own success (i.e., GO), perceptions of environmental definitions of success (i.e., MC), and how these achievement-oriented values relate to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and life

Table 2
Descriptive data on all adolescent variables.

	n = 123		
	M	Sd	Range
School performance climate	29.95	8.06	10–50
School mastery climate	39.62	7.32	11–55
Adolescent ego orientation	27.44	7.55	8–40
Adolescent task orientation	32.80	5.55	8–40
Depressive symptoms	8.43	5.40	0–32
Anxiety symptoms	9.98	6.77	0–32
Life satisfaction	23.76	6.28	5–35

Table 3
Correlations among all variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. School performance climate	1							
2. School mastery climate	-.372**	1						
3. Adolescent ego orientation	.302**	-.162	1					
4. Adolescent task orientation	-.088	.372**	.045	1				
5. Depressive symptoms	.282**	-.383**	.225*	-.271**	1			
6. Anxiety symptoms	.290**	-.306**	.233**	-.160	.783**	1		
7. Life satisfaction	-.202*	.200*	-.038	.254**	-.510**	-.461**	1	
8. Adolescent GPA	.04	.07	.08	-.10	-.09	-.07	-.01	1

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Main effects of MC and GO on adjustment (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, and life satisfaction).

		B	B	t	p
School performance climate	Depressive Sxs	.19	.28	3.20	.002
	Anxiety Sxs	.24	.29	3.31	.001
	Life satisfaction	-.16	-.20	-2.27	.025
School mastery climate	Depressive Sxs	-.28	-.38	-4.46	.000
	Anxiety Sxs	-.28	-.30	-3.47	.001
	Life satisfaction	.17	.20	2.45	.027
Ego orientation	Depressive Sxs	.16	.23	2.60	.011
	Anxiety Sxs	.21	.24	2.69	.008
	Life satisfaction	-.03	-.04	-.42	.672
Task orientation	Depressive Sxs	-.26	-.27	-3.06	.003
	Anxiety Sxs	-.19	-.16	-1.76	.080
	Life satisfaction	.29	.25	2.90	.004

satisfaction. Findings highlight the importance of promoting healthy conceptualizations of success rather than solely discouraging unhealthy ones.

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