

An exploration of the relationship between ethical orientation and goal orientation

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ABSTRACT

Published research suggests that goal orientation may be associated with a choice to behave unethically. This study addresses the possibility of whether such a conclusion may have been inaccurate. A distinct possibility exists that a different trait – ethical orientation – may be at least as important as goal orientation in explaining ethical behavior. The current study begins to address that possibility by reporting on an exploratory investigation of the relationship between individual ethical ideologies and trait goal orientations. It is hypothesized that idealism would be significantly related to learning goal orientation, and that relativism would be significantly related to both performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientation. Results from 321 participants revealed partial support for the hypotheses. Significant relationships were found between relativism and three types of trait goal orientation: learning goal orientation, performance-approach goal orientation, and performance-avoidance goal orientation. The ethical dimension of idealism yielded a significant relationship only to performance-avoidance goal orientation. These results suggest that an analysis of the relationship of goal orientation and behavior should take ethical orientation into consideration in order to avoid inaccurate conclusions. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Ethical orientation, idealism, relativism, goal orientation

INTRODUCTION

“Relativity applies to physics, not ethics.” -Albert Einstein

While many may agree with Einstein that ethics are absolute, many others believe ethics are indeed relative—that the definition of what is “ethical” is subjective, dependent on a variety of factors ranging from context to consequences. Such differences in ethical judgment were conceptualized by Forsyth (1980) in his framework of ethical ideologies, and since that time researchers have attempted to expand our understanding of the connections between ethical ideologies and other individual differences (e.g. Chen & Liu, 2009; Wilson, 2003, Allmon et al, 2000).

O’Fallon and Butterfield’s (2005) review of ethical decision making research calls for exploration into individual factors that may influence the ethical decision making process. Individuals differ in what they believe constitutes ethical behavior, and an understanding of what underlies these differential conceptualizations is an important element in advancing ethics research. According to Wilson (2003), “investigators have little considered the content of ethical beliefs that associate with important personality variables...” (p.549). Since that time, although attention and publicity on ethical transgressions has skyrocketed, few pieces of research have looked into these potential associations between ethical orientation and personality.

To build upon this initial research, the current study reviews the limited literature on ethical ideology and individual differences and aims to expand our understanding of these connections by examining the relationship between how one views ethical decisions and how one views achievement situations. While several key pieces of research have studied the impact of achievement goal-orientations and ethical decisions, no published research has addressed how the interplay between ethics and goals may expand to the relationships between ethical ideology and goal orientations.

Therefore, the goal of the current study is to explore the individual differences underlying achievement goals (personal goal orientations), propose relationships that may exist between these individual differences and ethical ideologies, and to empirically test the presence of these relationships. Thus, the purpose of the current study is exploratory: to investigate the connection between ethical ideologies and individual goal orientations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ethical Ideologies

Ethical ideologies represent individual differences in core beliefs and values. These ideologies provide an individual with a guiding framework with which to consider ethical quandaries and serve to guide an individual and explain differences in ethical judgments (Forsyth, 1980; 1992). At the most basic level, according to Forsyth, ethical ideologies can be broken down into two core ideologies: idealism and relativism. Idealism refers to the individual’s attitude about the consequences of his or her actions, and an attention to being mindful of how the outcomes of one’s actions will affect others. Individuals who are high idealists possess the core value that acting morally will lead to positive consequences for the individual, and believe it is never acceptable to act in a way that may be harmful to others. Those who are low in idealism instead believe that there is a time and place for harmful actions, and that such actions may at

times be necessary in the process of achieving a greater good. Relativism refers to the extent to which an individual subscribes to universal moral rules and codes. High relativists believe there are no absolute moral rules, and what is the “right” thing to do is largely dependent on the circumstances of a particular situation. Those low in relativism, in contrast, rely on strict universal principles when assessing the ethics of a particular action (Forsyth, 1980).

Previous research by Allmon et al (2000) explored possible empirical relationships between ethical orientation and personality, focusing in particular on connecting the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) with the Kiersey Temperament Sorter, an instrument used to create a typology of personalities. Using a sample of business students, the authors found ethical orientation differed across personality type. Wilson (2003) explored the relationships between social dominance orientation and ethical ideology, finding a negative relationship between social dominance and idealism. While these results are encouraging and establish a preliminary empirical connection between ethical orientation and personality, additional research is necessary to further explore such relationships. Identification of a relationship between ethical orientation and other specific personality traits could prove useful from a practical perspective, thus it is important to investigate additional personality traits that may meaningfully relate to differences in ethical orientations.

In determining which personality traits may have meaningful connections to ethical ideologies, past literature has revealed that there may be an important connection between the types of goals an individual pursues and their subsequent ethical choices resulting from the pursuit of such goals.

Goals and Ethics

Literature in both the business and academic realm has suggested that there are conceptual and empirical relationships between goals and ethical behavior (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998; Murdock & Anderman, 2006; Seijts & Latham, 2005). Of particular interest is the suggested connection between goal types and ethics. Theories of achievement motivation within the educational realm distinguish between *learning* goals of understanding or mastering the material, and *performance* goals that involve demonstrating competence by focusing on an extrinsic measure of success, such as obtaining a particular grade (Urdu, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Past studies have suggested that an emphasis on performance outcome goals may inadvertently motivate unethical behavior, whereas a focus on mastery or learning goals within an organization tends to shift attention away from the end result, therefore creating less likelihood that unethical behaviors will occur in order to ensure a satisfactory end result.

Research within the educational domain examining the emphasis of either learning or performance goals within a classroom context has also shown that an emphasis on learning and mastery, as opposed to a focus on performance outcomes, tends to decrease instances of academic cheating behavior (Murdock & Anderman, 2006). Multiple studies have demonstrated that individuals pursuing strong performance goals tend to be more apt to cheat or act in an academically dishonest manner (Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, 1998; Murdock & Anderman, 2006) than those who are not as strongly performance oriented. The conceptual rationale behind this finding is that those who are focused on extrinsic measures of success see the process of education simply as a necessary mechanism to obtain the outcomes they are interested in achieving, and are less concerned about how that outcome is obtained. When

individuals are focused on performance goals, success is measured in terms of extrinsic rewards rather than by the *process* by which those rewards are obtained.

Connections between goal setting and outcomes have also been suggested within a business context. Seijts and Latham (2005) argue that the assignment of performance goals without knowledge of how to attain those goals may lead to a performance-at-any-cost mentality. Initial empirical studies have found that performance goals lead to more instances of unethical behavior than do-your-best goals (Schweitzer, Ordóñez and Douma, 2004). In a 2004 *Academy of Management* article, Schweitzer et al concluded that “goal setting motivates unethical behavior when people fall sort of their goals (422).” Using methodology widely accepted in the psychology literature, the authors focused on a limited set of variables to explain variation in subjects’ performance, including what type of goal had been set (learning or performance) and participants’ commitment to their goal. The authors compared their assessment of subjects’ performance to subjects’ own measures and attributed intention to inaccuracies in subjects’ self-reported task performance (“overstatement”), arguing that the “pattern of results supports the proposition that many of these cases were calculated lies (p. 429).” Contrary to the authors’ conclusion that their results “offer insight into the mechanics of this problem,” a potentially significant oversight in the research method calls into question the appropriateness of attributing the results of the presumed-intentionally misrepresented performance to the fact that a goal was set for performance, rather than investigating the possibility that the results might have represented individual differences in underlying ethical ideology (i.e. the likelihood that some participants find it easier than others to engage in intentional deception, regardless of whether they are specifically responding to set goals or not). Such oversight raises questions as to whether the results of numerous studies attributing specific performance outcomes to goals set would be replicable if other potential explanatory variables had been examined within the research designs.

Focusing on the importance of understanding the role of individual differences when investigating the goal-ethics linkage, studies examining the impact of goals on ethical behavior must also take into account the role of individual differences in ethical ideology. Past research has suggested that differences in goals have led individuals to choose whether or not to behave ethically. However, such a designation is itself somewhat subjective in nature. As previously discussed, an individual’s ethical ideology influences their judgment about what types of behaviors are truly “ethical” (Forsyth, 1980; 1981; 1982).

This argument suggests that the relationship between types of goals and ethical behavior is one that should be explored in further depth. A majority of past research on the subject, while advancing knowledge about the goal setting-ethical behavior relationship in important ways, has focused on externally assigned goals, such as those determined by a teacher or manager, rather than investigating self-set or internally generated goals. Because trait-based goal orientations are distinctively different than externally assigned goals (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005), it seems there is an unfulfilled need to investigate what types of relationships may exist between trait-based goal-orientations and ethics. Indeed, Schweitzer, et al, say that “Quite possibly, self-generated goals would influence unethical behavior differently.” (p.429, 2004)

Goal Orientations

Goal orientations have become one of the most frequently studied motivational variables in applied psychology and are currently the dominant approach in the study of achievement

motivation (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Goal orientations are mental frameworks used by an individual to interpret and respond to achievement situations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). While research has operationalized goal orientations in a number of ways (see DeShon and Gillespie, 2005, for a review), the current investigation views goal orientations as traits, or inherent, *stable* achievement tendencies within an individual. Previous research has established that goal orientation comprises three separate dimensions: learning goal orientation, performance-approach goal orientation, and performance-avoidance goal orientation (VandeWalle, 1997). These different dimensions of goal orientation are representative of different ideas about success, and differing reasons for engaging in achievement situations (Ames, 1992; Ford, Smith, Weissbein, Gully, & Salas, 1998). Achievement goals are mechanisms through which individuals pursue their needs, wants, and concerns (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Previous research has explored some of what may underlie differences in goal orientations, such as individual needs or fears (Elliot, 1999). However, to date no published studies investigate the connection between ethical ideologies and goal orientations.

Individuals with strong learning goal orientations possess an inherent desire to increase their competency levels and improve their skills and abilities. Such individuals tend to view failures as learning opportunities, and as such tend to demonstrate preferences for challenging tasks where they can learn and improve. At the core of a strong learning goal orientation is the belief that effort can lead to *absolute* competence (Elliot & Thrash, 2001).

Performance goal orientations, in contrast, are focused on a pursuit of *relative* competence, meaning such goals are focused on demonstrating competence as compared to others. Performance goal orientations can be broken down into two separate dimensions: performance-approach and performance-avoidance. While this distinction is a relatively recent one in the research literature, these two types of performance goal orientations are representative of important differences. Individuals with a performance-approach goal orientation are interested in and seek out situations where their performance will be evaluated positively as compared to others, leading to a desirable outcome for the individual. In contrast, those with a performance-avoidance goal orientation focus on staying away from situations where their performance will be unfavorably evaluated in comparison to others, leading to an undesirable outcome (Elliot & Thrash, 2001).

HYPOTHESES

We argue that less idealistic individuals are likely to possess a stronger learning goal orientation than those who are more idealistic. An individual with a strong learning goal orientation is process focused, paying attention to how things are done and dedicated to the pursuit of finding the best strategies and methods for goal attainment, and is less focused on the consequences of his or her actions. Such individuals believe the old adage that “in order to make an omelet, it is sometimes necessary to break a few eggs”, and therefore will be focused on attempting to improve and perfect their strategies for goal attainment. In the process of obtaining mastery, it is possible such individuals also possess low idealism belief that it is at times necessary to engage in harmful actions, as they may be instrumental in the pursuit of greater good.

H1: Individuals lower in idealism will be more likely to have a higher learning goal orientation than those higher in idealism.

We find no strong theoretical rationale for a relationship in either direction between learning goal orientation and relativism. Therefore, this paper proposes no formal hypotheses regarding this relationship.

Individuals with a performance-approach orientation or a performance-avoidance orientation tend to focus upon the outcome and how their performance will compare with others. Specifically, those with a performance-approach orientation tend to seek out situations where they can prove their competence and display their abilities as compared to others. Those with a strong performance-avoid orientation tend to avoid any situations where their performance may be negatively evaluated (VandeWalle, 1997).

The underlying nature of both types of performance goal orientations suggests that those with either type of performance goal orientation are inclined to rely on a more relativist thinking than those with weaker performance goal orientations. The inherent tendency of pursuing performance-approach goals or performance-avoid goals requires an individual to evaluate the circumstances of each situation in order to determine whether or not they will choose to engage in the task at hand. This tendency to evaluate circumstances prior to deciding on a course of action is indicative of performance-approach and performance avoid goal orientations, as well as representative of the relativist tendency to evaluate situational circumstances before determining what the best course of action may be.

H2: Individuals higher in relativism will be more likely to have a higher performance-approach goal orientation than those lower in relativism.

H3: Individuals higher in relativism will be more likely to have a higher performance-avoidance goal orientation than those lower in performance-avoidance goal orientation.

We find no compelling conceptual rationale suggesting a significant relationship in either direction between performance-approach goal orientation and idealism, nor performance-avoidance goal orientation and idealism. Therefore, this paper proposes no formal hypotheses regarding these relationships.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Subjects were enrolled in an introductory business class at a large public Midwestern university. The subject of the class was not directly related to the goals of this study. All students in the class were offered extra credit in exchange for their participation; 321 chose to participate in the study. Subjects ranged in age from 18 to 35, with the mean age about 20.5; 52.6% were male and 47.4% were female. The data examined in this paper was collected electronically. Participants were given a link with which to access a survey that collected basic demographic information and measured the study's key variables discussed below.

Measures

Ethical Ideology. Subjects completed the Ethics Position Questionnaire developed by Forsyth (1980). The EPQ is a 20-item survey measuring two ethical dimensions, idealism and relativism. Each item is answered using a 5-item Likert scale where 1= Disagree Strongly and 5= Agree Strongly. Following most other researchers' use of Forsyth's ethical dimensions, individual scores on the 10 items corresponding to idealism are summed to create a grand total

score for idealism. The same is done for realism. One of the 10 questions measuring idealism is “The existence of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained”. One of the 10 questions measuring relativism is “What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another.” In this sample the Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for the idealism scale was .83, and the Cronbach’s alpha for the relativism scale was .76.

Goal Orientations. Participants completed a 13-item measure of goal orientation originally developed by VandeWalle (1997). Questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A sample item for the learning goal orientation was “I prefer challenging and difficult classes so that I’ll learn a great deal.” Questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach’s alpha reliability for this scale was .80. A sample item for the performance-approach goal orientation was “I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my ability to others”, and the Cronbach’s alpha was .78. A sample item for the performance-avoidance goal orientation was “I would avoid taking on a new task if there was a chance that I would appear rather incompetent to others”, and the Cronbach’s alpha was .70.

RESULTS

Table 1 (Appendix) presents the means, standard deviations, and simple correlations of the study variables. Correlation coefficients provide preliminary support for several of the proposed hypotheses. Specifically, both performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations are significantly positively related to relativism (P-AP=.186; $p<.001$, P-AV=.253, $p<.000$). The relationship between learning goal orientation and idealism was non-significant (.083, $p=.127$).

As can be seen in Table 2 (Appendix), next the sample was divided into subgroups using a median-split of the sample based on scores on the idealism scale. Subjects in the low-idealism subgroup had idealism scores that were less than or equal to 34, while subjects in the high idealism subgroup had scores greater than 34. Mean scores for each of the three goal orientation variables were compared for the two subgroups. T-tests comparing the means across the two subsamples revealed no significant differences in learning goal orientation or performance-approach goal orientation. Interestingly, significant differences were found for performance-avoidance goal orientation; those in the high idealism subgroup had significantly higher mean scores on performance-avoidance goal orientation (3.5) than those in the low idealism subgroup (3.33, $p<.05$).

We next split the sample based on median scores on the relativism scale. Subjects in the low-relativism subgroup had relativism scores that were less than or equal to 32, whereas those in the high-relativism subgroup had scores that were greater than 32. Mean scores for each of the three goal orientation scales were compared for the two subgroups. T-tests comparing the means across the two subsamples revealed significant differences in all three types of goal orientation. Those in the high relativism subgroup had a mean learning goal orientation score of 3.67, as compared to a mean score of 3.84 for those in the low-relativism subgroup ($p<.05$). For performance-approach goal orientation, those in the high relativism subgroup had a mean score of 3.59, whereas those in the low-relativism subgroup had a mean score of 3.31 ($p<.01$). For performance-avoidance goal orientation, those in the high relativism subgroup had a mean score of 3.57, whereas those in the low relativism subgroup had a mean score of 3.26 ($p<.01$).

Finally, to investigate whether these results are robust to the consideration of additional variables, multiple regression analyses were conducted. In particular, it is important to test whether the relationship between one dimension of ethical ideology and goal orientation hold up when the other dimension of ethical ideology is controlled for. The regression results are presented in Table 3 (Appendix); in general, these regression results confirm the preliminary findings. For hypothesis 1, multivariate regression results confirm the earlier findings that there is no statistically significant relationship between learning goal orientation and idealism. Regarding the relationship between relativism and learning goal orientation, the multivariate regression results show a significant beta ($\beta = -.02$, $p < .01$).

For hypothesis 2, multivariate regression results confirm the earlier findings that there is indeed a significant relationship between relativism and performance-approach goal orientation ($\beta = .033$, $p < .01$). With regard to hypothesis 3, multivariate regression results reported in Table 3 (Appendix) confirm a statistically significant relationship between performance-avoidance goal orientation and relativism ($\beta = .033$; $p < .01$). In addition, there is a statistically significant relationship between performance-avoidance goal orientation and idealism ($\beta = .014$; $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to explore the potential relationships between individual ethical ideologies and trait goal orientation. Although past research has identified that certain types of assigned goals are linked to unethical behaviors (Schweitzer et al, 2004; Murdock & Anderman, 2006), and that ethical ideologies may connect in important ways to other individual differences (Chen & Liu, 2009), this is the first published study to investigate how trait goal orientations may relate to individual ethical ideologies.

Integrating the body of past conceptual and empirical research on goals and ethics leads to the hypothesis that individuals low in idealism would possess a strong learning goal orientation. Conceptually, this hypothesis was based on the notion that those with stronger learning goal orientations focus on the process of mastery, rather than attending to the end consequences of their actions, which is consistent with the low idealistic idea that an individual need not be mindful of the outcome or impact of one's actions. However, this investigation did not find idealism to be significantly related to learning goal orientation leading to a lack of support for hypothesis 1.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. While both strong learning goal orientation and low idealism suggest a focus on process without regard for outcomes, idealism also appears to tap into the notion that an individual either is or is not concerned with how their actions may impact the welfare of others. Learning goal orientation, while process focused, does not speak to an individual's regard for other's welfare. It is likely that the lack of significant relationship (either positive or negative) between these two constructs in the current study may reflect that one construct is more related to a concern about the welfare of others, while the other is a much more self-focused concept.

Our second formal hypothesis postulated a positive relationship between relativism and performance-approach goal orientation. Conceptually, this relationship is based on the underlying idea that high relativists are focused on an assessment of what is best for each particular situation, rejecting universal moral principles, and those with performance-approach goal orientation also subscribe to this key nature of assessing each particular situation before deciding how they will act, and choosing only to "approach" the situations where they feel their

performance will be positively evaluated. The results of the current study reveal a significant positive correlation between relativism and performance-approach goal orientation. There is also a significantly higher level of performance-approach goal orientation within the high relativism subgroup as opposed to the low relativism subgroup. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Regarding the last formal hypothesis, postulating a positive relationship between relativism and performance-avoidance goal orientation, the results indicate a significant correlation between the two constructs, and the t-test comparison of means between the high relativism and low relativism subgroups found significant differences on performance-approach goal orientation. Those with a strong performance-avoidance goal orientation tend to avoid any situation where they feel they cannot adequately demonstrate their capabilities, suggesting they do possess universal standards for what is acceptable, and they tend to avoid any situation where they feel they cannot achieve those standards. Therefore, the results support for Hypothesis 3.

Next the discussion focuses on interesting empirical findings beyond those related to the paper's formal hypotheses. Results in Table 2 indicate that learning goal orientation was lower among participants high in relativism in this sample. Future research should investigate possible theoretical reasons for the presence of a relationship between learning goal orientation and relativism. No formal hypotheses were proposed regarding the relationship between idealism and performance-avoidance goal orientation. While the simple correlation between idealism and performance-avoidance goal orientation was not significant, the comparison of subgroup means did reveal a significantly higher level of performance-avoidance goal orientation in the high idealism subgroup than in the low idealism subgroup. Future research should investigate conceptual and theoretical reasons why this relationship may exist.

As with any empirical study, this research has several limitations that should be noted. This study was exploratory in nature, and as a result, must be viewed as an initial step in exploring the complex connections between ethical ideologies and individual goal orientations. This study focused on the impact of individual goal orientations on ethical ideologies but did not examine other individual difference variables that may also be important to consider. For example, past research has found individual differences such as authoritarianism and Machiavellianism to relate to ethical ideologies (McHoskey, 1996; Wilson, 2003). Future research should consider how individual differences such as these may play into the relationship between ethical ideologies and goal orientations.

Also, this study did not examine any behavioral outcomes. Recent research notes that the process by which goals are achieved is likely to play an important role in behavior and outcome-oriented ethics (Baugher and Weisbord, 2009). While one's ethical ideology may impact an individual's judgment of the ethical nature of a particular behavior, future research should examine how the interplay between ethical ideologies and goal orientations may influence behavioral choices.

The current study represents an important first step in exploring the conceptual and empirical connections between individual goal orientations and ethical ideologies. Interestingly, the ethical ideology of relativism yielded a significant relationship with all three types of goal orientation in this investigation, while the ideology of idealism yielded only one significant relationship (with performance-avoidance orientation).

These findings suggest that the concept of individual relativism may play a particularly important and interesting role in understanding why individuals possess certain kinds of goal orientation, and why certain goal orientations are related to subsequent behavioral choices. Specifically, these findings suggest that those with either type of performance goal orientation

are characterized by a relativist nature of evaluating the situation and circumstances before making decisions about how to act or whether to engage. Those with strong learning goal orientations seem instead to follow more universal tendencies to focus on mastery and learning processes without regard to the particular situational circumstances.

Overall, the results of the current study provide interesting perspective and insight into the interplay between individually held achievement goals and individually held ethical perspectives. Further, it expands our understanding of how ethical ideologies relate to other individual differences. Future exploration of the many potential conceptual and empirical questions generated by this initial investigation is likely to yield interesting results.

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TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlation Coefficients

Variable	Mean	SD	Idealism	Relativism	LGO	PAPO	PAVO
Idealism	36.33	6.65	--	-.028	.083	.047	.101
Relativism	32.25	6.14		--	-.174**	.186**	.253**
LGO	3.75	.71			--	.043	-.480**
PAPO	3.46	.86				--	.250**
PAVO	3.43	.73					--

NOTES: * indicates $p \leq .05$; ** indicates $p \leq .01$
 LGO = learning goal orientation
 PAPO = performance approach goal orientation
 PAVO = performance goal orientation

TABLE 2
Comparison of Means

Variable	High Relativism	Low Relativism	High Idealism	Low Idealism
LGO	3.67	3.84*	3.76	3.72
PAPO	3.59	3.31**	3.47	3.46
PAVO	3.57	3.26**	3.50	3.33*

NOTES: *indicates $p \leq .05$, ** indicates $p \leq .01$

LGO = learning goal orientation

PAPO = performance approach goal orientation

PAVO = performance goal orientation



TABLE 3
Regression Results

Variable	<u>Dependent Variables</u>		
	<u>LGO</u>	<u>PAPO</u>	<u>PAVO</u>
	<u>Beta (SE)</u>	<u>Beta (SE)</u>	<u>Beta (SE)</u>
Idealism	.004 (.006)	.008 (.007)	.014 (.006)**
Relativism	-.02 (.006)**	.033 (.008)**	.033 (.007)**
R-squared	.03	.06	.09

NOTES: * indicates $p \leq .05$, ** indicates $p \leq .01$
 LGO = learning goal orientation
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