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Original

## Motivational Class Climate, Motivation and Academic Success in University Students<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to predict academic success based on the motivational class climate, mediated by the university students' motivation. The participants are 758 university students from the Dominican Republic, aged between 18 and 50 years (21.1% men and 78.9% women). A battery of instruments was administered to measure the indicated variables and a full structural equations model was applied to predict academic success. The results highlight the direct effect of student perceptions of autonomy support on their satisfaction with the educational center, and the effect of satisfying basic psychological needs, both on satisfaction with the center and on academic performance. Perceiving the support of teachers for autonomous work and feeling satisfied the basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are the best predictors, among the ones tested, of academic success in university students.

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### Clima motivacional en clase, motivación y éxito académico en estudiantes universitarios

#### RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es predecir el éxito académico a partir del clima motivacional de la clase, mediado por la motivación del estudiantado universitario. Los participantes son 758 estudiantes universitarios de República Dominicana, con edades comprendidas entre 18 y 50 años (21.1% hombres y 78.9% mujeres). Se administra una batería de instrumentos para medir las variables señaladas y se aplica un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales completo para predecir el éxito académico. De los resultados destaca el efecto directo del apoyo a la autonomía de los estudiantes sobre su satisfacción con el centro educativo, y el efecto de la satisfacción de las necesidades básicas tanto sobre la satisfacción con el centro como sobre el rendimiento académico. Percibir el apoyo del profesorado para el trabajo autónomo y sentir satisfechas las necesidades de autonomía, competencia y relación son los mejores predictores, de entre los considerados, del éxito académico en los estudiantes universitarios.

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## Introduction

Students' academic success is an aspect that concerns the students themselves, families, teachers and society in general (Fenollar, Román, & Cuestas, 2007). Teachers and educational psychologists ask themselves daily which are the contextual and personal variables that influence the academic success of students (Chen, 2015). Numerous research try to give answer to this question, mainly in the contexts of primary education, secondary and baccalaureate. Conversely, research at university settings is less abundant. In addition, it is suggested that the motivations and conceptions of learning may be different in secondary education than in higher education (Oriol-Granado, Mendoza-Lira, Covarrubias-Aplaza, & Molina-López, 2017).

Academic success is a construct that is usually limited to the quantitative or qualitative expression of academic performance, that is, the grades and evaluations derived from the assessment to which students are subjected in different school subjects, considering it a relatively objective indicator and easy to measure (Gordon, 2016). With the flowering of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), cognitive and emotional aspects such as student satisfaction with the educational center and their perception of subjective well-being have also been framed within academic success (Chen, 2015; Gutiérrez, Tomás, Romero, & Barica, 2017; Sivandini, Koohbanani, & Vahidi, 2013; Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2012).

In recent decades, empirical interest has grown on psychoeducational constructs considered key to understand educational outcomes (Green et al., 2012). One of these constructs is motivation (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Daniels et al., 2014; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Matos, Lens, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2017). The two most used motivational theories in recent decades to explain students' academic success are the Achievement Goals Theory (AGT, Ames, 1992) and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2009). These theories are not opposed or disjunctive, rather their theoretical contributions complement each other.

In the AGT we must highlight the personal perspective (dispositional goal orientations) and the contextual perspective or motivational climates (Elliot, 2005). The first focuses on knowing how individuals adopt different types of personal goals: mastery (or learning) and performance (or comparison), which represent different points of view about their own competence. The aim of the mastery orientation is to increase personal competence, while the performance orientation is focused on demonstrating competence in relation to others. Motivational climates refer to how different contextual goal structures influence achievement in educational settings. A mastery climate means that emphasis is placed on understanding work, effort and personal improvement. According to this perspective, the student is more likely to adopt mastery goals and select challenging tasks, make attributions of success based on effort, be perceived competent and show positive attitudes toward school work. When the importance of grades and competence among students is emphasized, they are more likely to adopt performance goals and show non-adaptive learning patterns (Ames, 1992; Elliot, 2005). The importance of the motivational class climate in adopting adaptive patterns has been observed in a number of investigations (Ames, 1992; Carmichael, Muir, & Callingham, 2017; Church et al., 2001; Lau & Nie, 2008; Wolters, 2004). Students' perceptions of motivational climates are predictive of the personal goals students adopt in class (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). The motivational class climates are generally considered to be precursors to the students' goal orientations, which are believed to have a very powerful influence on motivation and achievement

(Urdan, 2004). School motivational climates can predict the students' cognitive, emotional and behavioral patterns, both directly and through personal goal orientations (Church et al., 2001; Daniels et al., 2014; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Wolters, 2004).

Studies like that by Lau and Nie (2008) find that both the performance climate and the personal performance orientation are related to maladaptive patterns of achievement, while mastery climate and the personal mastery orientation show positive relationships with achievement. Wolters (2004) also finds positive relationships between mastery climate and mastery goal orientation with achievement, while the relationships between performance climate and performance goal orientation with the achievement variables are less consistent. In this sense, Linnenbrink (2005) finds that students with high mastery orientation report high academic efficiency, positive affect, persistence and achievement in mathematics. On the contrary, performance orientation was only a predictor of emotional well-being and achievement monitoring. Students focused on demonstrating competence at the beginning of the study tended to score lower on the math tests than students who had shown greater mastery orientation. In general, mastery goals are positively related to positive components of well-being, while performance goals appear associated with the negative components of subjective well-being (Chen, 2015).

Maehr (2001) emphasizes the importance of motivational climate in the promotion of achievement goals, and the design of intervention programs to promote goals with educational purposes, because the goals of the students represent their reasons for participating in academic tasks and achievements. According to Linnenbrink (2005), although the contextual and personal perspectives are complementary and mutually informative, there is little research that has integrated both to study motivation in achievement contexts.

A general assumption of the SDT is that if in the interaction with the environment people regulate their behaviors voluntarily, the quality of the involvement and their well-being will be favored. On the contrary, if the environment acts in a controlling manner, this innate tendency will be frustrated and discomfort will develop (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, it is important the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Lee, Lee, & Bong, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The degree teachers support the needs of students, and specifically the need for autonomy, has an important effect on the students' motivation, showing more interest in their work, with better performance and enjoying greater well-being (Reeve, 2009). On the contrary, students with controlling teachers experience a greater sense of coercion and less school engagement, have a lower ability to self-regulate their learning, achieve lower performance and suffer from a low feeling of well-being (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Shih, 2013).

Bearing in mind that the AGT and the SDT are complementary and relevant to academic achievement, the aim of this work is to predict the university students' academic success based on the autonomy support and the motivational class climate (mastery climate, performance climate), mediated by the students' motivations (mastery orientation, performance orientation) and the basic psychological needs satisfaction, as shown by the hypothetical model of Figure 1. We start from the following hypothesis: (1) Teachers' autonomy support positively influence the mastery goal orientation and basic psychological needs satisfaction, and negatively students' performance goal orientation; (2) Mastery class climate is positively related to mastery goal orientation and basic psychological needs satisfaction, and negatively to performance goal orientation; (3) Performance climate is positively related to

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