

Ethical Value Inclinations and Academic Ethical Values Of Postgraduate Health Science Students

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Abstract

Introduction: In postgraduate education, it is important to adopt academic ethical values as well as ethical values. The aim of this study was to examine the ethical value Inclinations and academic ethical values of postgraduate health science students.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted with 203 postgraduate students enrolled in the Health Sciences Institute. Data were gathered with a “Personal Data Form,” the “The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale” and the “Academic Ethics Values Scale”.

Results: The students' inclination to ethical values and their sensitivity to academic ethical values were quite high level and particularly greater among doctoral thesis students and the nursing students. A positive and moderate correlation was found between the students' inclination to ethical values and their sensitivity toward academic ethics values.

Conclusions: It was found that ethical values and academic ethical values were higher in nursing graduate students than in other health science students.

Background

Postgraduate degree programs are the highest level of education that universities provide in the effort to acquire the academics needed for their own purposes, to generate the manpower required by the community at large, and to act as a resource for aspiring researchers. Turkey has adopted the eight competence levels of the European Qualification Framework/EQF, which stipulates that individuals enrolled in a Master's Degree or Doctoral Degree program as part of their postgraduate studies are considered to be involved in their first stage of research, while those with a doctoral degree are evaluated as having excellent skills in research. The Turkish Higher Education Qualification Framework sets forth the universal, individual and professional values students should strive for, specifying that students studying for their Master's Degree are expected to be equipped with competency in “being an individual who possesses and acts in accordance with professional values and ethics” and “having the skills to oversee and teach students in one's relevant field how to collect, interpret, implement data and reveal results on the basis of social, scientific, cultural and ethical standards.” With respect to doctoral education competencies, students are expected to be equipped with the skills needed in “being able to contribute to the solution of social, scientific, cultural and ethical problems and support the improvements to be made in the standards governing these”.¹

Science, art and philosophy need to be incorporated in postgraduate degree programs.² Because of this, in accordance with the mission and vision of postgraduate education, it is important not only to adopt inclination to ethical values in the education process but to adopt that the academic ethics values (AEV) as well. Values adopted in the community are based on the positive, powerful and emotional dedication with which individuals approach the values of truth, equity, personal integrity and compassion.^{3,4} As professionals in the field of health³ make and implement decisions for the sake of both the community and the individual, they must adopt and adhere to the principles of ethics.⁵

The academic ethics values come into play in a process that incorporates a pattern of appropriate behaviors that unfold with the appearance of a problem and are then applied.⁶ Besides the process of producing a scientific study, the researcher's scientific undertakings, relations with academic colleagues, responsibilities toward the institution where he/she works and relationships with the target audience, in other words, the students, and in short, all elements involved in the areas of scientific interactions are dimensions that can be considered to be within the scope of the academic ethics values. Acting in accordance with these values means that they have been internalized in all of their various dimensions.⁷

Institutions of learning need to make every effort to be the kind of educational body that transfers to their students not only cognitive skills but also all of the values that complete a human being.⁸ Studies have shown that education makes a difference in how professional values are formulated.⁹⁻¹¹ It has been reported that education that incorporates ethics is effective in urging students to implement ethical values in their working lives and raising students' awareness about ethics in general. At the same time, students who have taken courses in ethics have been observed to be more skillful in making ethical decisions compared to those who have not had such training.¹² Borhani et al. (2013) reported in a study they conducted with Master's program students found that ethical sensibilities were affected by individual and moral views, education, socialization and experience.¹³ A systematic review's results showed that the level of education had an impact on the professional values upheld by nurses, that students who had completed Master's and higher programs had higher levels of awareness in the context of ethical values.¹⁴

A review of the literature showed that although there are some results reported on the views on research ethics of academics or postgraduate students who are in the process of becoming academics,¹⁵⁻¹⁹ no studies were encountered in which the scientific attitudes and behaviors of individuals in postgraduate programs in the health field in particular had been investigated in terms of their inclination to ethical values and conducting a scientific process that is in keeping with these values. Health sciences postgraduate programs are responsible for the education of the leading scientists of the future who will be involved in social projects, making healthcare decisions, working as consultants and being at the vanguard of achievement. In this context, it is very important to examine the inclinations to ethical values, and the academic ethics values of individuals who receive postgraduate education in health sciences in order to reveal the gains of post-graduate education and to make effective plans in line with the results. The aim of this study is to contribute to the field literature by examining the inclinations to ethical values of postgraduate students in the health sciences and the extent to which they have internalized working with the academic ethics values in their scientific studies.

Method

Study design

This study is of analytical and cross-sectional design. The universe of the study consisted of 1020 regular students enrolled in the Health Sciences Institute of a university in the academic year 2020-2021.

The G-Power-3.1.9.2 program was used to calculate sample size prior to the data collection process. The differences in educational levels were tested with the ANOVA test. Accordingly, minimum sample size was found to be 188 with effect size calculated to be 0.25 (moderate), alpha value, 0.05, at a power of 0.80.²⁰ Since the data were to be collected via email, possible losses were considered and 250 participants were planned to be included in the study. However, because 47 participants either handed in incomplete or incorrectly filled out data collection forms, these individuals were excluded. The study was completed with a total of 203 participants.

Data collection

The data were collected with the "Personal Data Form," the "The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale (IEVS)" and the "Academic Ethics Values Scale (AEVS)."

Personal Data Form: This form consists of 9 questions on the students' sociodemographic and professional characteristics.

The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale (IEVS): The “The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale, tested for validity and reliability by Kaya (2015) and consisting of 16 items, is a 5-point likert-type of measure in which items are rated as “1: I completely disagree,” “2: I disagree,” “3: I’m undecided,” “4: I agree,” and “5: I completely agree.” The scale is made up of three subfactors: Factor 1 – Love- respect (Items 1-8), Factor 2 – Justice- honesty (Items 9-13), and Factor 3: Cooperation (Items 14-16). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was found to be 0.90. In this study, the scale’s Cronbach’s alpha value was 0.96. Possible scores on the overall scale range from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 80. The higher the score on the overall scale or on its subscales, the higher is the inclination to ethical values.²¹

Academic Ethics Values Scale (AEVS): Sevim (2014) developed this scale to measure the level of academic ethics values individuals exhibited while in the process of their scientific studies, testing it for validity and reliability. The scale is a 5-point likert-type of measure that consists of 5 subscales and 50 items. The subscales are: Values for Scientific Research, Values for Colleagues, Values for Institution, Values for Society, and Values for the Teaching Process. Each item in the scale has been formulated to provide a range of responses producing the lowest to highest scores of 1-I definitely disagree, 2-I disagree, 3-I am undecided, 4-I agree and 5-I definitely agree. The lowest possible score on the scale is 50, the highest is 250. Cronbach’s Alpha for the scale is 0.90. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was found to be 0.91.⁷ Scale scores:

Score range	Rating	Interpretation
50-90	I definitely disagree	
91-130	I disagree	Low sensitivity
131-170	I’m Undecided	
171-210	I agree	High sensitivity
211-250	I definitely agree	

The data collection forms were sent to all 1020 of the regular students enrolled at the University’s Health Sciences Institute. In the event that a response was not received, the email was re-sent a maximum of 3 times 15 days apart and those who consented to participate in the research and fully completed the data collection forms were included in the research. The study was completed with 203 participants.

Analysis

The data analysis was performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows 22 package program. According to the normality testing (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), it was observed that the data did not display normal distribution ($p < 0.001$). The data were therefore evaluated with the Kruskal-Wallis and Bonferroni-corrected Mann-Whitney U tests and Spearman’s correlation test. Additionally, frequencies, percentages and mean tests were employed. The results were evaluated at a 95% confidence interval with significance at $p < 0.05$.

Results

The mean age of the participants was 33.55 ± 5.99 ; 82.3% were female, 53.2% were married. Of the students, 68.5% were in the nursing department, 24.1% were studying for their Master’s degree courses, 25.1% were preparing their Master’s theses, 21.2% were in the doctoral courses and 29.6% were working on their doctoral theses. Of the students, 88.2% said that they had received training on ethical standards in their postgraduate courses; 54.7% stated that they had received this training while studying for their Master’s Degrees.

The overall mean score of the students on The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale was 69.90 ± 12.30 . The mean scores on the subscales were 35.51 ± 6.23 on the love-respect subscale, 21.96 ± 4.18 on the justice-honesty subscale, and 12.42 ± 2.67 on the cooperation subscale. The students AEVS overall mean score was 204.73 ± 21.34 . The mean scores on the subscales were: 37.79 ± 4.42 for values for scientific research, 40.24 ± 4.68 for values for colleagues, 35.88 ± 5.56 for values for the institutional, 29.59 ± 3.56 for values for society, and 61.22 ± 8.94 for values for the teaching process.

It was seen that there was a statistically significant difference between the students' total mean score for their inclinations to ethical values according to their stages of postgraduate education and their mean score on the justice-honest subscale ($p < 0.05$). In the Benferroni Corrected Mann-Whitney U test, it was seen that the overall mean score on the inclinations to ethical values of students in the doctoral thesis stage and their mean score on the justice-honesty subscale were higher than in those students taking Master's Degree courses, and that the students in the doctoral thesis stage had higher scores on the justice-honesty subscale than the students in the Master's Thesis stage of their education ($p < 0.05$) (Table 1).

A statistically significant difference was noted between the overall inclinations to ethical values mean score of the students according to their postgraduate departments and the mean scores in all of the subscales of the scale ($p < 0.05$) (Table 1). The Benferroni Corrected Mann-Whitney test showed that the inclinations to ethical values overall mean score of the students in the nursing department and their mean scores in all of the subscales were higher than the students in Nutrition-Dietetics and the other departments and that those in the nursing department had higher Cooperation subscale mean scores than the students studying for their Master's Degrees in Medicine. The Cooperation scores of the students in the Midwifery department were higher that of those in the nutrition and dietetics and other departments ($p < 0.05$).

It was found that, according to the students' postgraduate education stages, there was a statistically significant difference between their total AEVS mean scores and their mean scores on the subscales of values for scientific research, values for society and values for the teaching process ($p < 0.05$) (Table 2). The Benferroni Corrected Mann-Whitney U test indicated that the difference stemmed from the students in the doctoral thesis stage of their education ($p < 0.05$).

It was found that, according to their postgraduate departments there was a statistically significant difference between their overall AEVS mean score and their mean scores on the subscales of values for scientific research, values for the institution ($p < 0.05$) (Table 2). The Benferroni Corrected Mann-Whitney test determined that the overall AEVS mean score of the students in the nursing department and their mean values for scientific research mean scores were higher than the students in Nutrition and Dietetics, and that their AEVS overall mean score and their overall mean score for values for the institution were higher than those of the students enrolled in any of the other departments. It was also seen that the total mean score of the students in the Nutrition and Dietetics division in terms of Values for the Institution was higher than that of the students enrolled in any of the other divisions ($p < 0.05$).

A positive, moderate and statistically significant correlation was found between the students' Inclinations to Ethical Values Scale overall and subscale mean scores and AEVS overall and subscale mean scores ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3). The relationships between the sub-factor mean scores for the two scales can be seen in Table 3.

Discussion

In this study, which was conducted to investigate the inclination to ethical values, and the academic ethics values of postgraduate students in the health sciences, revealed that the students' inclination to ethical values and academic

ethics values was considerably high. Considering that health sciences graduate programs train scientists who will be a pioneer in many social studies, health care decisions, consultancy, research and practice, it is very important that these individuals have high inclination to ethical values and high sensitivity to academic ethics values. From this perspective, it is important to know that the results of the study indicate that the ethical values emphasized by the European Qualification Framework and the Turkish Higher Education Qualification Framework have been internalized by postgraduate students in the health sciences. Our results are parallel to those reported by other academics in the health field in the limited number of studies on this subject in the literature.^{15,22,23,24} Uğurlu and Sert (2020) have asserted in a study conducted to determine the academic ethics values of postgraduate students that their attitudes toward the academic ethics values is at a moderate level.²⁵ It is believed that the difference between the present study and the mentioned research stems from the fact that the sample group in the former study encompasses postgraduate students in all fields.

Studies carried out in the world and in Turkey have demonstrated that postgraduate students generally do not comply with the rules of ethics in their theses and other research work.^{26,27,27,29,30} To expect a progress in science, however, it is imperative to ensure that graduate students, researchers and faculty adhere to ethical values.³¹ Some studies have indicated that differences in education have an influence on the development of professional values.^{9,10,11} In this study, it was observed that the higher the academic level, the higher was the inclination to ethical values of students and the greater was their sensitivity in the context of the academic ethics values. In particular, it was seen that students in the process of their doctoral thesis displayed a higher inclination to ethical values, especially toward values regarding justice and honesty, than the participants in the study who were in the Master's Degree program or process of Master's Degree Thesis. It was found that the higher the level of the health sciences postgraduate students' education, the higher was their sensitivity toward academic ethics values, especially in values for scientific research, values for society and values for the teaching process. It was also seen that these values were higher in the participants who were in the process of their doctoral thesis program than in those who were in the Master's Degree course program, working on their process of Master's Thesis or in their Doctoral Degree course program.

As can be noted, the doctoral degree program was the period in which ethical values stood at their highest level and it was seen in particular that the doctoral thesis process was the time that was considerably effective in the acquisition of these values. Doctoral programs carry great importance both on a national and an international scale.³² As specified in the European Qualification Framework (EQF), among the learning outcomes expected from students in a doctoral program is to be able to contribute to resolving social, scientific, cultural and ethical issues encountered in the individual's field and support the improvements to be made in this context.³¹ In particular, the learning outcomes of bringing innovation to the field, developing a new idea, method, design and/or practice or adapting a known thought, method, design and/or practice to a new area of knowledge and contributing to the field by independently producing a pertinent original work are all supported by the Ph.D. process, which is where the knowledge and experience gained in all the other academic stages are actively used in the light of ethical values. The results of the present study indicate that in the health sciences field, students studying for their postgraduate education predominantly possess these skills. Denat et al. (2019) showed in their study concerning academic ethics values among academics that as the level of education rose, so too did the level of academic ethical values, and the group that particularly appeared to be most sensitive to this matter were professors, followed by assistant professors and associate professors.¹⁵ Aydın et al. (2012) showed in their study that ethical responsibilities in 14 professions were mostly borne by professors.²³ As can be seen from both studies, the academic group that has internalized academic ethics values the most constitutes professors. The findings of the study reveal that the tendency and sensitivity to upholding ethical values grows as academic knowledge and experience increases. These results are consistent with the outcome of our own study.

It was seen in our study that the inclination to ethical values and sensitivity toward academic ethics values among the participants in the nursing department were at a higher level than in the participants in all of the other health sciences departments. It was found that the inclination to ethical values (justice-honesty, love-respect, cooperation) of the participants in the nursing department and their sensitivity toward academic ethics values and values for scientific research were at a higher level than participants in the Nutrition and Dietetics division; their sensitivity toward academic ethics values and values for the institution were higher than among the participants in the other divisions, and their inclination in particular to the ethical values encompassing cooperation was higher than in those participants who were studying for their postgraduate education in Medicine. The inclination to ethical values for cooperation of the participants in the Midwifery department was at a higher level than among those studying in the Nutrition and Dietetics and other departments. It was found that the sensitivity of the participants in the Nutrition and Dietetics Department particularly toward values for the institution was at a higher level than in those in other departments.

When the mean scores of inclination to academic values of the students studying for their Master's Degree in Health Sciences were examined according to their division, it was found that the first three highest scores belonged to the students in the Nursing, Medicine and Midwifery departments; in terms of the AEVS, the highest mean scores were in Nursing, Midwifery and Medicine. The professions in health science provide a unique service.³³ The fields of nursing, medicine and midwifery deal with the protection and improvement of human health under conditions rife with uncertainty, difficulty and high risk, and by their very nature present a definitive need for an ethical perspective. Because of this it is imperative that healthcare professionals become more familiar with ethical principles so that they may be able to make ethical decisions.³⁴ The results of this study demonstrate that individuals in postgraduate programs in Nursing, Midwifery and Medicine have a higher inclination to ethical values and a greater sensitivity toward the academic ethics values. It was seen that the inclination to ethical values and the sensitivity toward academic ethics values was especially high in the nursing department. It is reported in a systematic review that the level of education has an effect on nurses' professional values and that students who have studied for a undergraduate education degree and beyond display a higher awareness of ethical values. The review pointed to the fact that nurses with higher education provided a higher quality of care and relied more predominantly on adopting professional ethics values.¹⁴ Other studies have supported the results of this research. Nurses come face-to-face with ethical dilemmas in their professional practices and they carry the responsibility of creating ways to resolve issues under the guidance of universal principles of ethics.³⁵ In the light of the responsibility that nurses carry, ethics principles are treated at each stage of nursing education, discussions about ethics are held in each nursing course and particularly during doctoral coursework and, although content and class hours may change depending upon the school, students take classes that provide instruction on the ethics of academic research and publishing.^{36,37} The results of this study demonstrate that this approach to nurses' training make a visible difference in postgraduate school nursing education in comparison to other university departments.

Ethical values and academic ethics values are two fundamental concepts that complement each other. The concept of "value" is a priority of academic ethics values. Values can be considered from a national perspective but can also be universal. The discipline that studies the moral values of conduct is ethics.³⁸ Ethical principles shape the behavior of individuals in all areas of learning and the academic ethics values formalize the conduct of individuals working in science.³⁹ No other study has been encountered in the literature that has explored the relationship of these two concepts. In this study, we found a positive and moderate significant relationship between postgraduate students in the health field in terms of their inclination to ethical values and their sensitivity toward the academic ethics values. The result of this study, which supports the literature information, is an important finding showing that as the ethical sensitivity of learners increase, their sensitivity to academic ethics values increases.

Strengths and limitations of the study

These findings cannot be generalized to all postgraduate students studying in the field of health sciences in Turkey. The study was conducted in only one university in Turkey and there was either low (2%) or no participation from some of the health sciences departments. Furthermore, the data collected on the postgraduate students' inclination to ethical values in the health sciences departments and their sensitivity toward academic ethics values was limited to what could be derived from the items on the scale. For this reason, the results are based on individual self-reporting.

Conclusion

It was seen that the inclination to ethical values and the sensitivity toward academic ethics values of the postgraduate students, considered to be the academics of the future, was markedly high, and as the stage of postgraduate learning rose, the acceptance of values increased. In particular, it was found that this inclination was particularly greater among students in the doctoral thesis stage of their education and the students in the nursing department and that there was a correlation between the students' inclination to ethical values and their sensitivity toward academic ethics values. It is important to establish a strong university culture that upholds ethical principles and conduct. An important part of this culture is indisputably a university's postgraduate students. In order to ensure that academics at all stages of their scholarship internalize the principles of academics ethics at the highest level, institutions may regularly organize meetings, workshops and conferences directed toward raising awareness. The responsibility of conducting oneself in line with ethics belongs to the individual but it must be said that more comprehensive policies should be developed to prevent and monitor unethical conduct. Future research that will treat ethical values and academic ethics values in depth will no doubt provide enlightening results and evidence regarding this important issue.

Declarations

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Authors' contributions

Study design, data collection and manuscript writing; YD, ET, data analysis; YD.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by from Aydın Adnan Menderes University Nursing Faculty Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee No 50107718-050.99/21.04.2020). Research permission from the institution where the study was conducted was obtained. The informed consent of the students participating was received. All students had provided both verbal and written informed consent for their voluntary participation and agreed with the terms stated in the consent form. All procedures were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines. All the processes of the research were conducted in accordance with [World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki](#).

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and analyzed in this study can be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Tables

Table 1

Distribution of mean scores of the students' inclinations to ethical values according to their postgraduate education stages and their departments (n=203)

Stages of Education	The Inclination to Ethical Values							
	Love- Respect		Justice- Honesty		Cooperation		Total IEVS*	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
Master's Degree Courses	33.83	9.01	20.22	5.63	11.38	3.47	65.44	17.51
Master's Degree Thesis	35.05	6.39	21.90	4.16	12.39	2.67	69.35	12.33
Doctoral Courses	36.48	3.06	22.44	2.46	12.95	1.92	71.88	6.48
Doctoral Thesis	36.58	4.60	23.08	3.32	12.93	2.14	72.60	9.09
Statistical Analysis	KW**=3.075 p=0.380		KW=12.995 p=0.005		KW=6.459 p=0.091		KW=7.928 p=0.048	
Department								
Nursing	36.20	5.52	22.41	3.84	12.96	2.39	71.58	11.05
Midwifery	33.80	9.35	20.60	5.85	12.50	3.68	66.90	18.51
Nutrition and Dietetics	33.93	7.75	20.83	4.72	10.83	2.78	65.60	14.18
Medicine	35.80	3.25	23.00	2.58	12.00	1.76	70.80	6.26
Other	33.07	7.57	20.14	5.08	10.78	3.04	64.00	14.99
Statistical Analysis	KW= 9.987 p=0.041		KW=10.970 p=0.027		KW=29.775 p=0.000		KW=19.100 p=0.001	

*IEVS: The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale

**KW: Kruskal-Wallis test

Table 2

Distribution of mean scores of the students' academic ethics values according to their postgraduate education stages and their departments (n=203)

*AEVS: Academic Ethics Values Scale

**KW: Kruskal-Wallis test

Academic Ethics Values												
Stages of Education	Values for Scientific Research		Values for Colleagues		Values for Institution		Values for Society		Values for the Teaching Process		AEVS* Total	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
Master's Degree Courses	36.36	4.48	39.06	5.84	35.32	4.81	29.24	4.26	59.40	11.77	199.40	27.64
Master's Degree Thesis	37.25	4.47	40.39	5.29	36.17	4.09	28.66	3.90	59.41	10.43	201.90	22.89
Doctoral Courses	37.65	4.49	40.13	3.22	35.32	4.35	29.51	2.66	61.41	5.58	204.04	14.88
Doctoral Thesis	39.51	3.78	41.16	3.76	36.50	4.87	30.71	2.92	64.10	5.68	212.00	15.85
Statistical Analysis	KW=15.082 p=0.002		KW=4.626 p=0.201		KW=3.113 p=0.374		KW=11.674 p=0.009		KW=10.087 p=0.018		KW=10.169 p=0.017	
Department												
Nursing	38.38	4.44	40.69	4.57	36.39	4.54	29.89	3.33	61.99	8.35	207.35	20.29
Midwifery	36.60	3.30	41.10	4.28	33.90	4.45	30.10	3.47	64.50	6.11	206.20	17.42
Nutrition and Dietetics	36.50	4.43	39.10	4.97	35.70	4.76	29.20	3.62	58.40	10.85	198.90	24.42
Medicine	36.10	3.47	39.70	4.02	35.10	4.90	28.70	3.23	60.70	5.49	200.30	18.32
Other	36.78	4.77	38.07	5.38	33.21	3.01	27.71	5.31	57.64	12.02	193.42	25.06
Statistical Analysis	KW=10.442 p=0.034		KW=7.082 p=0.132		KW=11.164 p=0.025		KW=3.502 p=0.478		KW=8.426 p=0.077		KW=10.695 p=0.030	

Table 3

Spearman's correlations between students' inclinations to ethical values and the academic ethics values (n=203)

*AEVS: Academic Ethics Values Scale

**IEVS: The Inclination to Ethical Values Scale

r: Spearman's correlation value.

The Academic Ethics Values

The Inclination to Ethical Values	Values for Scientific Research		Values for Colleagues		Values for Institution		Values for Society		Values for the Teaching Process		AEVS* Total	
	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	p
	Love- Respect	.373	0.000	.473	0.000	.497	0.000	.348	0.000	.475	0.000	.546
Justice- Honesty	.440	0.000	.453	0.000	.528	0.000	.214	0.002	.403	0.000	.515	0.000
Cooperation	.338	0.000	.431	0.000	.434	0.000	.277	0.000	.418	0.000	.501	0.000
IEVS** Total	.462	0.000	.524	0.000	.561	0.000	.326	0.000	.492	0.000	.601	0.000