

Stress and Family Relationships among College Students¹

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This study examined the relationship between stress and the family relationships of college students. One hundred thirty 18-23 year old students at Robert Morris University were surveyed on their levels of school stress and their family relationships, as well as demographic questions. Findings indicated there was a significant negative correlation between stress and family relationships among freshmen, but not among upperclassmen. This may be due to a stronger family connection among freshmen that decays each year in college as students learn to depend less on family. Higher GPA's were also associated with lower levels of stress. However, GPA and family relationships were not correlated. This suggests that the stress and GPA relationship may be due to an unmeasured factor.

Introduction

It is likely that anxiety and stress are common among college students. Sources of stress can include adjustment to college life, academic pressures and responsibilities, and financial problems (Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Hayashino, & Prince, 2010). Adjusting to college life may take a toll on some students. Often students who withdraw from college do so for personal reasons such as their lack of adjustment (Yazedjian, Toews, & Navarro, 2009). Each student has a different method for coping with anxiety. Studying different sources of these coping strategies is important so that it may facilitate future students in managing their own stress and thereby reduce the likelihood of withdrawal from school. Looking at the influence of family in managing anxiety is important because family is a resource that may be readily available to most students.

College life brings with it a variety of sources of anxiety. For example, test anxiety refers to anxiety felt by students in an assessment context such as an examination (Putwain, Woods, & Symes, 2010). Several studies, as discussed by Putwain, et al., report that perceptions of lower competence predict higher test anxiety. Putwain, et al. studied the relationship between parental support/pressure and test anxiety through self-report data. The results showed that there was a

significant positive correlation between parental pressure and worry, the more pressure put on the students by their parents the more worry by the student. The researchers discussed that improving students' perception of their academic competence may reduce anxiety, as well as informing parents of test anxiety so they may support and not pressure their child. In turn, the support may reduce test anxiety in students.

Perhaps one of the most central characteristics of test anxiety is a fear-of-failure. Students who experience test anxiety often engage in deficient study skills and the procrastination of academic work (Putwain, et al., 2010). This deficient academic behavior is evoked when the student believes that the evaluative situation exceeds his or her capabilities (Putwain, et al., 2010). Anxiety of all types in college students may turn to their participation in reduced academic effort and health-risk behaviors. Health-risk behaviors defined by Schwartz, Zamboanga, Ravert, and Kim (2009) include binge drinking, illicit drug use, unsafe sexual behavior, and impaired driving. Schwartz, et al. (2010) argue that worsened relationships with mothers and fathers during adolescence may help explain the elevated levels of risk taking of college aged emerging adults. Schwartz, et al. (2009) used an online survey to generate support for the conclusion that parental acceptance was related to lower levels of

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participation in health risk behaviors. Participation in health-risk behaviors tend to be most prevalent in emerging adulthood (late teens and twenties) and especially among college students (Schwartz, et al., 2010).

Drinking games are often associated with binge drinking which is widely considered to be a health-risk behavior. Ham, Zamboanga, Olthuis, Casner, and Bui (2010) examined the association between social anxiety and drinking games. According to the Expectancy Theory described by Ham, et al., expectations that are positive about the effects of alcohol in relation to social anxiety increase the use of alcohol (Ham, et al., 2010). The researchers noted that the connection between social anxiety and problematic alcohol use is important to look at in attempts to reduce unhealthy drinking behaviors. Self-report surveys showed that socially anxious students expecting alcohol to reduce the tension played drinking games more frequently than those who were not socially anxious (Ham, et al., 2010). These results were consistent with Schwartz et al. (2010) in that anxiety of different types can lead to dangerous behaviors. Schwartz et al. (2010) also indicated college students' feelings of acceptance by their parents as adolescents, appear to be strongly protective against health-risk behaviors. Schwartz et al. (2010) suggest that parents, and their acceptance, are important when it comes to guiding adolescent's transition to adulthood.

Feelings of acceptance by parents are not only linked to health-risk behaviors, in the study by Yazedjian, et al. (2009), feelings were also linked to adjustment to college life and academic achievement. Yazedjian, et al. (2009) examined the role of parents in facilitating adjustment and achievement in college through an online survey. The results showed that the quality of parental relationships were significant correlates of both college adjustment and GPA. Those students who have better relationships with their parents adjusted to college easier and had better GPA's than those who have a worse relationship. The amount of parental education (whether or not they went to college or any other form of post-secondary schooling) was also significantly correlated with adjustment and achievement. Students whose parents went to college adjusted easier and had an overall better GPA, than those whose parents did

not attend college. Yazedjian et al. (2009) showed the importance of parental relationships, and other parental factors as being important for the adjustment and academic achievement of college students.

Research on parental factors and family relationships has examined whether they have any relationship with birth order. Middleborns have been shown by Pollet and Nettle (2009) to have significantly worse family relationships than either firstborns or lastborns. Firstborns were significantly more likely than laterborns to have good family relationships with their siblings and were more likely than laterborns to prefer their sibling to their friend (Pollet & Nettle, 2009). Pollet and Nettle (2009) studied adult sibling relationships, but also mentioned worsened middleborn relationships among undergraduates. Feelings of neglect due to worsened family relationships may increase the likelihood for anxiety and therefore must be looked at to identify possible means to facilitate anxiety management.

Due to the fact that there is a prevalent amount of stress and anxiety among college students, actions should be taken to facilitate the management of these factors. Ratanasiripong, et al. (2010), used a Biofeedback program as a means for intervention for high stressed and anxiety students. The biofeedback program was a method of helping individuals learn how to control various physiological processes such as muscle tension, blood pressure, heart rate, and more (Ratanasiripong et al., 2010). The researchers explained how biofeedback helped the students with stress, anxiety, college adjustment, depression, headaches, and many other issues. The purpose of researching this program was because stress and anxiety are increasing, but there are limited resources for students (Ratanasiripong et al., 2010). This type of stress reducing programming costs money and time, however, if a family can facilitate the same results then it will cost no money and less time. In fact, it may be that specific aspects of family relationships may be more or less important in facilitating stress reduction.

Previous research in the areas of anxiety and family relationships show significant correlations between college students and anxiety. Research has also found significant correlations between

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family relationships and anxiety, destructive behavior, and academic achievement. Previous research has failed to focus on family relationship and academic stress factors in undergraduate college students, which may be important for adjustment and success rates for college.

The present study examined the relationship between academic stress and the quality of family relationships among college students. It is important to examine this relationship because previous research, such as Ham, et al. (2010), has shown links between anxiety and destructive behavior, such as binge drinking, drug use, and risky sexual behavior. Having a good family relationship can be an easier and more efficient way of coping with stress than bio-feedback or campus programs that require staff and resources.

The goal of this study was to examine whether the quality of family relationships is related to academic stress in undergraduate college students. It was hypothesized that stronger family relationships would be correlated with less stress among students. Based on the research of Pollet and Nettle (2009) and Yazedjian, et al. (2009), it was predicted that students whose relationships with their family include acceptance, comfort, and encouragement would report having relatively strong family relationships. It was also predicted, based on the work of Putwain, et al. (2010), that having strong relationships may be related to reduced stress levels. If students do not have a strong relationship with their families, they may feel no sense of a support system, and their stress levels may be higher than those who do have strong relationships. However, family relationships were expected to become less influential as students advanced through college due to the likelihood that the longer students were on campus, the more campus-based support relationships they could establish to gradually replace those of family.

Method

Participants

In the present study, 131 college-aged students participated. Each subject was enrolled at a small private university in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Fifty-nine of the participants were male and seventy-one were female. There were sixty-four freshmen, thirty-three sophomores, sixteen juniors,

and eighteen seniors. Participation in the present research resulted in extra course credit awarded to all volunteers.

Design & Materials

A correlational design was used to examine the relationships among the variables of Academic Stress, Family Relationships, and self-reported GPA. Stress and family relationship scores were measured by a special questionnaire created for the study. The first part of the questionnaire used in the present study contained items concerning the levels of stress students felt they had, related to academics. The second set of questions concerned students perceptions of their personal family relationships. The final set of questions asked demographic questions, (year in college, GPA, age and sex). Questions on Anxiety and Family Relationships were measured using a five-point likert scale. Scores ranged from 5-25 on the Stress Questions and 5-30 on the Family relationship questions. Higher scores indicated a greater degree of both.

Procedure

The participants were informed that all data would be anonymous and were therefore told not to write their names on any data forms. The participants were told they were not required to complete the survey if they did not want to and were asked not to take the survey again if they already took it in another class. No information was given about the survey or study prior to the participants seeing it. The questionnaire was then handed out and it took about 15 minutes to complete. Questionnaires were collected as each student finished.

Results

Based on previous research (Putwain, et al., 2010; Schwartz, et al., 2009; Yazedjian, et al., 2009), it was hypothesized that the quality of family relationships (in terms of support and belongingness) would be negatively correlated with stress. In addition, it was expected that lower levels of stress would benefit students in terms of their academic performance (GPA). This was based on research examining test anxiety, parental support and parental pressure. In other words, if family support was sufficient to reduce stress and anxiety, then these benefits could translate into

stronger academic outcomes. However, the present study did not differentiate stress and test-anxiety. Finally, because freshmen are less likely to have developed support systems that are independent of family compared with upper classmen (e.g., college friends, sport and club groups, faculty and staff professional relationships, etc.), these relationships were expected to be strongest for freshmen relative to upperclassmen.

To examine these hypotheses, correlation analyses were performed on the variables of Family Relationship, Stress, and GPA. None of these analyses resulted in significant correlations. Family Relationship and Stress, $r(97) = -0.097, p > .05$; Stress and GPA, $r(94) = -0.117, p > .05$; Family Relationship and GPA, $r(94) = 0.047, p > .05$. However, because the freshmen were expected to show stronger correlations than upper classmen, these analyses were performed on just the data from freshmen.

Correlation analyses performed on the variables of Family Relationship, Stress, and GPA for freshmen alone revealed two significant outcomes. A negative correlation was found between Family Relationship and Stress, $r(61) = -0.222, p < .05$. Also, a negative correlation was found between Stress and GPA, $r(58) = -0.221, p < .05$. The correlation between Family Relationship and GPA was not significant, $r(58) = 0.101, p > .05$.

Discussion

In this study, college students were used to assess their levels of academic stress and their relationships with their families. Past studies have shown relationships between parental pressure/support and test anxiety, as in the study done by Putwain, et al. (2010). Schwartz, et al. (2009) as well as Yazedjian, et al. (2009) found correlations between parental relationships and health-risk behaviors and parental relationships and college adjustment. This identifies that parental factors (such as support) are related to better college adjustment and lower chances of participating in health risk behaviors. The present study showed that there is a negative correlation between stress and family relationships among college freshmen. This was expected because college freshmen have yet to establish college-based support systems that could substitute for

family support structures. Upperclassmen have had more opportunity to build relationships outside of their family with the people that currently surround them. Upperclassmen have had more time to gain relationships with roommates, teammates, club members, classmates and numerous others they may have bonded with during their academic careers. This idea supports the findings of Puwain, et al. (2010); as well as Yazedjian, et al. (2009).

To examine whether there is a causal relationship between the present variables, future studies might consider manipulating family contact of freshmen (i.e. having half of them talk with their families regularly, and half of them volunteer to speak less with their families). This may show how much these freshmen depend on their families for support. Future studies may also interview freshmen as well as upperclassmen to get more detailed qualitative results of their family relationships, to see the extent to which family contact is relied upon for support. Finally, it might also be worthwhile to examine commuter students as they represent a group who may be more likely to rely on family support throughout their academic careers.

Family relationships and GPA showed no significant correlations. This may be due to the relationship between parental pressure and worry presented by Putwain, et al. (2010). That is, parental pressure may lead to worry, however this worry could either push students to excel academically, or make them fail. Future studies should assess how these relationships can increase GPA by implementing manipulations of family contact.

Friends may be a support system for students that lead to methods of coping with stress. However, no significant correlation between friends and stress was found. This may be due to the wording of the item in the survey. Asking participants to list the number of "close friends" they had may not be a precise enough means to assess this potential support system because the concept may be defined differently by each individual. To examine this issue further, more detailed questions about friendships may help to clearly identify local support systems. The present study found significant correlations between family relationships and academics stress among

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college freshmen, which may provide the first step toward stress management knowledge for students.

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